

SIREN PUBLISHING *Classic*

Lillith Payne

Her Cowboy Indiscretion



Her Cowboy Indiscretion

Long ago, Ileanna experienced one night of sexual abandon with a hot cowboy during a Halloween party. Now, years later, meeting Chance brings the experience forward in her mind. Just because this man resembles her one-time lover doesn't mean it's him, and she's been too badly burned by relationships to care.

Chance meets an amazing woman in an elevator who sends his mind reeling. Meeting her a second time at a social function, he realized his initial impressions were correct. She is a woman he could love for too many reasons. Their immediate draw to each other is undeniable, yet Ileanna is confused and frustrated by his distant approach to their budding relationship.

Ileanna decides she must remind Chance of their first meeting before they make permanent plans. Will the memory of their first encounter spoil their future, or will their past strengthen their bond?

Genre: Contemporary, Western/Cowboys

Length: 56,864 words

HER COWBOY INDISCRETION

Lillith Payne

EROTIC ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

ABOUT THE E-BOOK YOU HAVE PURCHASED:

Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to only ONE LEGAL copy for your own personal reading on your own personal computer or device. **You do not have resell or distribution rights without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.** This book cannot be copied in any format, sold, or otherwise transferred from your computer to another through upload to a file sharing peer to peer program, for free or for a fee, or as a prize in any contest. Such action is illegal and in violation of the U.S. Copyright Law. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden. If you do not want this book anymore, you must delete it from your computer.

WARNING: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000.

If you find a Siren-BookStrand e-book being sold or shared illegally, please let us know at **legal@sirenbookstrand.com**

A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

HER COWBOY INDISCRETION

Copyright © 2011 by Lillith Payne

E-book ISBN: 1-61034-303-4

First E-book Publication: March 2011

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

All cover art and logo copyright © 2011 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

Letter to Readers

Dear Readers,

If you have purchased this copy of *Her Cowboy Indiscretion* by Lillith Payne from BookStrand.com or its official distributors, thank you. Also, thank you for not sharing your copy of this book.

Regarding E-book Piracy

This book is copyrighted intellectual property. No other individual or group has resale rights, auction rights, membership rights, sharing rights, or any kind of rights to sell or to give away a copy of this book.

The author and the publisher work very hard to bring our paying readers high-quality reading entertainment.

This is Lillith Payne's livelihood. It's fair and simple. Please respect Ms. Payne's right to earn a living from her work.

Amanda Hilton, Publisher
www.SirenPublishing.com
www.BookStrand.com

DEDICATION

For my husband, my muse.

HER COWBOY INDISCRETION

LILLITH PAYNE

Copyright © 2011

Prologue

“In or out?”

His voice had a Southern twang to it, but she noted a bit of New Yorker thrown in. Still she paused, checking the hallway hoping someone else would come along, finally spotting the pin-dot red flash of the hidden security camera.

“Yes or no, lady?”

What was he saying, she thought as her movements carried her into the waiting elevator. Her hand automatically reached to push the appropriate button, but his arm was still in the way, holding the door open. She refused to make eye contact, noting his worn jeans and work boots. Her hand brushed his arm, feeling the texture of the worn broadcloth shirt he wore. The cuffs were turned back and she felt the hairs on his arm stand when she brushed against them. Giving in to temptation, she finally let her eyes wander up to his face. Breath caught in Anna’s throat as his silvery gray eyes met hers, burning the imprint on her brain. In that instant, it all came flooding back, her one indiscretion from so many years ago. It couldn’t be him, she decided, noting other tall, dark men had gray eyes.

She wanted to break the contact, to look away, but couldn’t. The door started to close again, forcing her attention away from him. He

cleared his throat, nodding to the back half of the large portfolio she carried. It was still half in and half out of the space.

“In or out?” he asked again. This time his words didn’t hold the same edge as they had earlier. She was still staring at him, watching his strong chin curl into a cynical grin. It took her another second to realize what he meant. Letting out her breath, she tugged the case into the car, spinning with it, just missing his legs in the process. When she finally settled at the back of the elevator, he took his arm away, allowing the doors to finally close.

Anna steadied her hands on the worn leather of the case, electing to stare up at the descending numbers as they lit up on the panel above the doors. He stayed where he was at the front, affording her a long glance at his solid legs, strong thighs, and slim waist. His shoulders were broad, not quite stretching the fabric of his shirt. Feeling a chill run through her, she looked up to see him glancing over his shoulder watching her check him out.

The rush of heat felt like fire as it ran up her neck and into her cheeks. She glanced away quickly, but not before she saw the self-serving smile he allowed himself. It was his smile that made her stomach clench, a smile she’d seen before, one she’d never forget. What should I do, she wondered, avoiding his gaze. Surely if it was him, he’d make some kind of acknowledgement, if he remembered her. Obviously he didn’t, so she chose to believe he was just a stranger with similar appearance.

The doors opened, letting a small man in a blue suit enter. He was oblivious to the others in the space as he tried to refold the newspaper he held. The second section slipped from his grasp, then the manila envelope tucked under his arm, landing on the floor. He scrambled to pick it up, losing his grip on the rest of the paper.

Her gray-eyed stranger bent down and retrieved the envelope, handing it to the man, nodding at him. The man only grunted in his direction, his attention focused on the refolding process of the paper.

Three, two, one, lobby, Anna read. The bell marked their arrival. As the doors slowly opened, the older man all but bolted from the car. She waited for the other man to exit. He again held the door with his arm, waiting for her to pass. With reluctance, she went ahead, his gaze burning on her back as she walked away. She forced herself to steady her gate, not wanting to run from the building.

Avoiding the revolving doors, she was shifting the case from one hand to the other as his familiar arm caught the door above her, pulling it open. Their eyes locked for a second, and then she went through, forcing herself to become lost in the swarm of people. It took all her will power not to turn around. She walked two blocks before pausing in front of a store window, letting herself glance behind her. He wasn't in sight. Though she was relieved, she was sad at the same time.

The memories came flooding back—the Halloween party, the man she'd been attracted to, the stranger she had sex with in the darkened hallway of the loft apartment. It was all so forbidden at the time.

They'd eyed each other across the party for most of the night. While Anna had tried to enjoy her time with friends, every time she turned, she felt his gaze. She hadn't been drinking or doing any drugs that might excuse her behavior. She simply felt an attraction to the man.

There had been no conversation between them. She'd simply walked up to him, reached for his hand, and directed him out of the apartment, turning to find the darkened stairwell empty. He'd followed her lead without question.

Not sorry for the act itself, she was always annoyed that she'd never learned his name. Then again, he hadn't asked for hers. The image of them in the dark stairwell flashed before, so intense it might have happened yesterday instead of years ago. He'd stood with his back to the wall, his legs braced, his hands biting into her thighs as he held her over his cock, sliding her up and down over his length.

His kisses were her downfall. What started as a quick kiss turned into the most sensual experience she'd ever had.

Anna knew if she hadn't dropped her hand to his crotch, it wouldn't have happened. She chose to stroke his erection as they battled with tongues. It was her decision to drop to her knees before him and take his cock from the confines of the tight denim, sucking him down her throat.

Standing on the street with people all around her, her pussy went liquid at the memory. He'd been so large, bigger than any man she'd experienced, not that there were many. Anna stood stock-still, letting the ripple of excitement the memory brought flow through her. Her breasts became heavy, her nipples hard. She continued to stare into the store window then closed her eyes.

The tone of his groan had been embedded in her being, the sound coming from deep within him as she'd scraped her teeth along his length on an outward pass.

Anna knew if it had been any other party, it never would have happened. But with the costume to shield her true identity, she took what she wanted from this stranger. Her modified witch costume gave her courage she didn't possess in real life.

The black satin bustier snuggled against her body, lifting and offering her breasts. Her black skirt with a handkerchief hem moved easily against her skin. She'd worn black high heels and thigh-high hose. Her mask was a bit more embellished. She'd made it herself, gluing rhinestones to it, making her eyes look more dramatic, especially with the heavy-handed makeup she'd applied. She wore a hat, a black pointed witch's hat.

His costume wasn't really a costume. He wore jeans and cowboy boots, a denim shirt, and a leather hat. The simple black mask covered his eyes, only letting her see the gray color, so intense.

They hadn't spoken. She simply turned against his body once they were out of view and kissed him. To this day she had no idea what she thought would happen, only that she wanted to experience this

stranger. He'd taken her hint, wrapping his arms around her waist, and tugged her up against his chest. The kiss had led her to experiment like never before. His gaze questioned her when she dropped before him, and Anna knew she'd simply smiled at him while taking his cock to her lips. He surged against her tongue several times, and she had been readying herself to accept his cum, but he'd reached down and drew her up against his body.

"You'll make me come if you keep sucking," he'd whispered, turning her back to the wall and reaching to her breasts. His hands covered her, stroked her bare chest, and ultimately released each breast from the cups. Anna had come the minute his lips attached to her nipple. His continued sucking, switching from side to side, always flexing his hand over the one he wasn't sucking, drove her beyond reason.

"Do you have protection?" she'd managed to ask, and he took a step back, staring at her. There was no debate. He'd taken out his wallet, handed her the silver package, and put the wallet back. She'd reached down and stroked his cock, still hot and full. Anna had been the one to tear open the package, pausing only to slip down and take a few last licks of his cock, tasting his droplets of pre-cum. Her fingers rolled the latex over him with confidence. As soon as he was covered, he'd grasped her by her shoulders and drew her to stand, while his hand reached under her skirt, drawing it up to her waist. The lace panties she'd worn were torn from her body without hesitation, his finger probing her immediately.

"You're hot to my touch," he'd whispered, nipping at her earlobe.

"Just fuck me," she'd uttered, her words sounding breathless. Grabbing her by the hips, he drew her up. She'd wrapped her legs around his hips, and he'd lowered her just a bit over his cock. He'd slid in her pussy with ease, pausing several times for her to shift him within her walls. Anna's hands snaked around his neck, pulling his mouth to hers, kissing him while his cock slid deeper inside her. "I've

never felt so full,” she’d told him and was rewarded with a confident smile.

“What will make you come?” His words punctuated each thrust.

“Take me from behind,” she’d boldly said and reluctantly moved her hands from his neck. He’d let her legs drop slowly to the floor, and she reluctantly let his cock slide from her body. Once she was settled, he’d turned her around and pulled her a few feet from the wall, widening her stance. Her skirt was still bundled up at her waist, her breasts exposed from the bustier top, her nipples hard. Anna braced her weight against the wall with her hands as he entered her pussy from behind. “Oh God, that’s it. Fuck me until I come.”

“Whatever you say.” He’d grabbed her hips and began thrusting in her body with deep intent. “Fondle your tit for me.”

Anna had never been so uninhibited, but she grasped her own breast and pinched her nipple. He’d used one hand to hold her in place and wrapped the other around her body, his large fingers teasing her clit. “Damn, girl, I’m gonna come.”

“More,” she’d said, pushing her buttocks backward to meet his thrusts. His hand left her clit and moved to her mouth. She sucked his finger greedily, her groan one of angst when he drew it from her lips. Anna continued to pinch her nipple, sending ripples of heat through her body. Her cowboy had stilled behind her, his hold on her hip tightening. On an outward pull, he’d slid his wet finger in her anus and then thrust his cock back in her pussy. Anna came instantly, but continued to absorb each push of his cock. He’d fucked her for a bit more, and then leaned forward, his lips to her neck. Sucking a patch of skin between his lips, she knew there’d be a mark there tomorrow and didn’t care, pushing back to impale herself deeper on his cock and his finger.

Her stranger came. She could feel his cock surge fuller inside her. He had taken a few more strokes, but his breathing had been irregular, as had hers. She hadn’t been sure what to do next, but he took the next

step, gently sliding his finger from her then taking a step back so his cock left her body.

“I’m so empty,” she’d said more to herself than to him. He’d grabbed her around the waist, turned her to face him, and pushed her against the wall. He held her tight until his breathing normalized. Reaching up, he fondled her breast and pinched her nipple one last time. Taking a step back, he pulled her skirt down over her naked pussy.

Anna had taken a few seconds before she managed to look at him, watching as he took the used protection and wrapped it in a red bandana handkerchief from his back pocket and pushed his cock back in his pants. Her hands finally lifted to her breasts to cover them, but he covered hers with his. He wore a large smile as he gingerly maneuvered her breasts, one by one back into the cups of her top. He gave her one last lingering kiss on the lips, his eyes burning into her memory. With one last pump of her tit, he took a step back further and tipped his hat. Then he was gone.

Anna spent a few minutes in the empty stairwell, gathering her wits and settling her costume before going back to the party. Once inside, she didn’t see her cowboy again. She found her friends, feigned tiredness, and left quickly. She’d never asked his name, never given hers, and figured she’d never see him again, which was fine with her. After what she’d allowed, what she’d asked him to do to her, she figured she was better off. He would be a moment in time she enjoyed, one she’d never forget, one she’d never acknowledge to anyone.

She wandered home slowly, thoughts of her phantom lover refreshed in her mind after seeing the gray-eyed man in the elevator. Now if she could just lose the smirk on her lips at the memory.

Chapter One

Annoyed with herself for not stopping work earlier, Anna scrambled around the apartment, pulling on hose as she went, checking under the couch in the living room for her black sling-back pumps. She found them under the kitchen table, and remembered kicking them off after the gala when she was waiting for the kettle to boil for her tea. She replaced the simple gold hoops in her ears for diamond teardrops. Smoothing the dark gold silk of the evening dress she wore, she paused in front of the hallway mirror to check her appearance. Satisfied with what she saw, she couldn't help but turn back for one last look at the project she had been working on.

The lighting had changed over the drawing table, the colors of her work muted. Giving in, she reached and jotted several notes on the work in pencil. She saw the time on the wall clock over her work area and dropped the pencil.

"Shoot. Ten after eight. Margie's going to kill me. I promised I'd be on time." Grabbing a small purse that resembled a green and gold Faberge egg, Anna phoned down to her doorman, Gus.

"Yes, Ms. Jennings?"

"Gus, a taxi please. I'm late again!"

"It'll be waiting for you." She heard the humor in his voice and stopped to lock her door. As she approached, the elevator doors opened. She entered and waited while the elevator slowly worked its way to the ground floor.

Gus held the front door open for her, a taxi waiting with its rear door open at the curb. "Thank you, Gus. I appreciate the elevator, too," she added as she all but sprinted through the marble lobby.

“Have a good time, Miss.” She waved and was already talking to the driver. She didn’t look back to see him smiling, rather told the driver there was an extra ten in it for him if he made it across town in ten minutes or less.

* * * *

Chance didn’t want to go out this evening. He sighed aloud as he dressed. “A cold beer and a pizza,” he said aloud, “is what I really want.” But, Margie had been instrumental in getting Lottie into Juilliard, and he had enjoyed the evenings he had spent with her and William. As he pulled on the navy blue suit jacket, he wondered if he would ever love a woman so much that he would throw an engagement party at a fancy hotel. He wondered if William had a choice in the planning or had just smiled and nodded.

Giving in to his inner child, he slipped off the blue stripe tie, folding it carefully and placing it in his pocket.

“Take me as I am,” he said to his reflection in the mirror. He unbuttoned the top two buttons of the starched white shirt. He took his keys and wallet from the dresser in front of him, not bothering to check his hair, knowing that it would be useless as he massaged his temples.

He decided to walk the six blocks to the hotel. He had fallen asleep on the couch watching the news and always woke with a headache after a nap. That was why he didn’t often allow himself to take one. Today it had just snuck up on him. Breathing in the cool night air seemed to ease the ache.

Entering the hotel, an elaborate signboard listed several parties and their locations. The doors to the elevator started to close as a woman approached. His hand grabbed the door so she could enter. Glancing to the side to see if the correct button had been pushed, she turned to face front. In doing so, she brushed against his shoulder.

There was no denying it was the same woman from the elevator last week. The mass of short brown curls fluffed around her face and bobbed as she moved. He was fascinated with the gold flecks rimming her dark green eyes. Chance hadn't resisted taking one long glance at the slim brunette who stood beside him in the elevator last week. The portfolio blocked her from the hips down but he had smiled openly as he noticed her small waist hidden under her blazer. Her white shirt was tucked into the slim waist of worn jeans. She wore no rings on her left hand, but her right hand wore a slim gold patterned band on her ring finger. The curls of her hair just grazed the collar of her shirt. She wore simple gold hoop earrings and almost no makeup that he could determine.

Pulling back a smile, he decided it was definitely the same woman, a woman he figured he'd never see again. Now here she was next to him in an elevator again, different building and, obviously from her formal appearance, for a different reason. He wondered if she was going to the same party. His cock stirred as he wondered if she'd remember him. He had a niggling in the back of his mind, reminding him of a Halloween party years before when he'd gotten reckless and had mind-blowing sex in a stairwell at a party with a brunette dressed as a witch.

"Thanks," she said distractedly, pulling him from the memory.

"No problem, I'm getting used to holding elevators for you." He watched voice recognition go through her like the first winds of winter. She froze for only a second before turning to look at him. He didn't hold back a wide smile.

Chance watched as recognition cleared her eyes. "I clean up pretty good, yes?" He let out a low laugh and watched her blush. As the color crept up her face, he felt something stir deep inside him. Shifting his weight, he pulled her elbow to him, closing the distance between them as a couple exited the halted elevator. When they had left, he didn't release her, simply kept his hand on her. "Are you following me?"

* * * *

Anna tilted her head back to look at him. She was tall for a woman, five eight without shoes, but tonight, even in heels, she had to look up to take in his smiling face. Realizing it was him because of his gray eyes, she grimaced at him and glanced away. When they reached the top floor, he held her back as the elevator emptied. They were the last two to exit. His hand was still lightly holding her arm as they paused several feet from the doors.

“Are you following me?” She was trying to reverse the tables on him, but the small nervous laugh that escaped gave her away.

“No. But given the chance...” She started to leave, but he held her arm. “Allow me...”

She watched him take out a pressed white handkerchief, dabbing her cheek. When he pulled away, there was a streak of blue across the white. “All better. Now you’re perfect.”

“I’d doubt that, but thank you. I stopped to check on work before I left.” She turned in a slow circle before him, using the mirrored elevator doors to assess for other imperfections. The high collar of her dress and the simple princess lines gave her the illusion of being taller than she was. She allowed him the long look, watching the way he watched her in the reflection. “Any other major wrecks that you can see?”

“None at all.” His grin gave away his duplicate thoughts.

Anna smiled. “I meant chalk dust!” She tried to sound hard, but didn’t manage to.

“I know.” He ran his hand through the top of his hair, not hiding the full smile filling his lip.

“Thanks for the repair.” They were interrupted by a voice coming from their left.

“There you are. I was wondering...” Margie slowed as she met them, taking full advantage of the scene unfolding in front of her.

“You two have met already? Good, let’s get you both inside for a drink.”

“No,” he said calmly.

“No,” Anna said, not so calmly.

“No to the drink, or no you haven’t met? Well, then let me introduce you.” She put an arm around each of their waists, directing them toward the music. Just before entering the party, Margie stopped. “Ileanna Jennings, this is Chance Walker. Chance, my best friend, Anna Jennings.”

“Nice to meet you, Anna.”

“Chance.” Anna only nodded.

“Let’s get you two a drink. I know I can use one even if you two can’t.” Chance hung back, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness of the room. Anna watched him head to the bar as she and Margie were swallowed up by the crowd of people. Anna didn’t know what he ordered, but it looked like sparkling water. He sipped as he surveyed the party. Even with the distance between, she noted several women caught his eye. He would smile and nod, then look away. He smiled when William walked up next to him. She had wound her way around the room and could just make out bits of their conversation.

“Chance, so glad you came.” William extended his hand.

“Great party, William, congratulations.”

“Thanks. Margie sure knows how to throw ’em.”

“In your line of work that’ll be helpful.”

“As long as she doesn’t bankrupt me in the process.” Their lighthearted banter went on for several minutes until William was summoned by a photographer. Anna took the interruption as a chance to leave the noisy party. She was only slightly surprised to see Chance brought his drink out onto the balcony too.

* * * *

Anna was leaning against the railing, surveying the New York skyline before her.

“Quite a view, it still amazes me each time I see it.” He hoped his voice was smooth and soothing.

“Hmm, me too. It never seems to get old. Do you live here now?” She didn’t turn to look at him. Her voice was imprinted within him as much as the image of her green eyes.

Chance settled against the railing, several feet to her right. “Only part time. I still have business back home.”

“Texas?”

“Yes, outside Dallas.” He turned around, leaning his back against the rail, his arms caught over the top of the cold metal. “How’d you guess?”

“The accent gave you away.”

“What accent?”

She laughed, a low, throaty sound that made Chance warm inside.

“Excuse me. It must be I’m listening with New Yorker ears.” She smiled and turned back to the skyline. Several minutes passed before he turned around again, facing the same view.

“You have a wonderful smile, but you don’t seem to use it very often.” She bristled, but didn’t answer.

“Oh God, I hate that aftershave,” she said out loud with a groan. He gave her a questioning look as a man appeared from behind her, lifting her off her feet by the waist, swinging her in a circle.

“Scott, put me down.”

“How did you know it was me?” Scott asked as he planted a large wet kiss on her cheek. Chance watched as she wiped it away with the back of her hand. “Oh, yes, the cologne.” He gave Chance the once-over then turned back to Anna. “This your new lover boy?”

Chance held back his fist. It was the way he said it, not so much the words, although they bothered him too. “Chance Walker, and you are?” He noted the man stiffened, as if it was an affront to the country that he didn’t know who he was.

“Scott Armstrong.” The men tenuously shook hands, eyeing each other. “So, are you the flavor of the month, Chance?”

“Really, Scott, don’t be an ass. I just met Chance tonight.” The tone in her voice was cautionary. “Where’s April? She let you out of the house without your leash tonight?”

Chance tried not to choke on his drink, but winked at Anna. He liked her. She had guts.

“She’s freshening up. She’ll be along soon.”

“Why not go and find her, instead of contaminating us with your scent?” Anna turned back to the view.

“Don’t put on airs for me, sweetheart. I know all your secrets.” Chance watched and listened to the conversation before him, sensing that Anna was uncomfortable. He was already balling his fist at his side, knowing while it would feel great to give Scott one clean hit wouldn’t do much for his reputation. He decided to wait it out, until he knew for sure what Anna and Scott’s relationship was.

“Still the sore loser, I see.” Scott draped one arm over her shoulder. Anna carefully used her fingers to remove and drop it. “It’s okay, baby, for old time’s sake.”

“Scott, I thought I’d find you out here.” Chance turned to look at the woman whose voice dripped with ice. He saw a tall, slim blonde woman in a white dress. From her manor and the jewels dripping from her neck, he realized that the Armstrong name went along with some of the major companies doing business in the city.

“April, you look lovely tonight.” Anna said it with a warm tone, but didn’t relax her posture. Chance was taken aback as the two women kissed air around their cheeks then went back to neutral corners.

“Thank you, Anna. And who is this tall drink of gorgeous?”

Chance watched Scott hurry to her side, possessively putting his arm around her waist.

“Chance Walker, ma’am.” He knew adding the ma’am with the overextended accent would annoy Scott. “And you would be?”

“April Armstrong.”

She extended her hand to his, which Chance took lightly, but did not bring to his lips. He noted Anna watched with fascination, Scott with anger.

“Does that mean this is your brother?” Chance nodded to the other man. Anna sipped her drink to cover a smile, while April seemed to be most appreciative of his attention.

“No. Quite the contrary, I’m her husband.”

“Oh, how nice for you, Scotty.” Adding the *Y* to his name, Chance knew he had made an enemy already, but he couldn’t help himself. This time Anna did laugh, out loud.

“Nobody is allowed to call him Scotty, even me,” April said.

“Oh, it would seem to fit his childish personality,” Chance added. He waited for a pause, then listened to the music coming from inside. “Nice to have met you all, but Anna promised me the first waltz. I believe they’re playing our song.” He didn’t leave her any choice, taking her elbow in his hand. She went with him willingly, her mouth pursed as she bit her lip to hold back a laugh until they reached the dance floor. After several smooth passes around, he finally felt her relax in his arms.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Nothing to tell, my ex-husband and his new wife.”

“Does he always...treat you that way?”

“No,” she answered. He watched as she nodded to another couple. “Only when he’s trying to annoy me.”

“Does he succeed?”

“On occasion.” She hesitated, but went on. “He seems to enjoy putting his brand on me, so to speak, but only in front of newcomers. If you hadn’t been there, he’d have probably just asked for a favor or suggested a tryst.”

Chance stopped dead in the middle of the dance floor, staring at her. The candlelight made the gold flecks on the rim of her eyes sparkle, and he found it hard to accept the words she had just said.

Slowly, he resumed their dance, after noting several people watching them. With forced practice, he let out a huge laugh and whispered to Anna.

Chapter Two

For a second he thought he was wrong about her, but then she pulled back and gave him a large smile, letting herself laugh aloud. Anyone watching them now would only see two people enjoying a private joke. It was especially necessary, for he had noted Scott watching them intently. The dynamics of the situation just kept escalating. He kept her in his arms for several songs, reluctantly letting her go only when the photographer interrupted them.

“I’ll wait for you at the bar.” Chance squeezed her arm lightly then let her go. He watched her leave the dance floor, talking with the photographer while Scott and April watched her every move.

Almost an hour passed before he spotted her again. She was entering the room from the main hall, and it afforded him a long full look at her. He had originally been attracted to her in the elevator just because of her height.

Most women thought because of his height he would gravitate toward a small woman. In fact, all through his schooling, short women were always trying to get him to go out with them. He knew he liked a tall, slim woman, someone who would hold her head high, not forcing him to stoop to talk to them.

The color gold she wore was perfect for her, her minimal jewelry, earrings and the ring her only adornments. He liked that she kept it simple yet outshined every other woman in the room, including the bride-to-be.

Sipping his sparkling water, he longed for a cold beer. Knowing he should wait until he got home for alcohol, he checked his watch. The sumptuous buffet was just being served. He figured it would be

rude to leave before the food, suddenly realizing that he was very hungry. Or was it her words that left his stomach with that empty feeling?

Probably just ask for a favor or suggest a tryst, he thought again. What kind of man is this guy? He watched from the side as she filled a small plate, stopped to talk with a young couple, and headed outside. He took his plate and went out through the other doorway. Wandering outside, he saw her at one of the small tables, relieved she was alone.

“May I?” He nodded to the seat.

“Sure. But I warn you, the gossip mill is in full tilt tonight.”

“Should that bother me?”

“Bothers some, other’s it doesn’t.”

“What about you?” Chance watched her put down the fork and meet him eye to eye.

“I decided a long time ago it just took too much energy to keep everyone happy.” Her stern look turned to a slight pout. “Now I don’t let it bother me. I try to stay out of trouble.” She finally laughed. “No trouble, no attention.” She flaked off a piece of the salmon filet, pushing it around in the sauce rather than eating it.

They ate in silence for a while then she pushed her plate forward. He noted it was all but full, just moved around.

“You peck at your food like you’re a bird.” He shook his head as he finished the herb-buttered toast.

“No, not usually.” She was watching the city lights, her voice distant.

“Couldn’t tell by that plate.”

“Give me a cheeseburger and fries at about eleven o’clock tonight, and stay out of the way of my fork.” She laughed, turning to him. “Why are you here, Chance?”

He settled back in his seat, tossing his napkin to the side. “I need you to be a little more specific. Do you mean why am I here at this party tonight? Or in the city, or at this table with you?”

“Yes, to all of the above.” She sipped at her wine then put it aside.

“I think we’re going to need a lot more time together if you really want answers to all those questions. Why not pick one, and we’ll go from there.” She sat forward, folding her hands on the table.

Anna waited for the waitress to clear their plates. “Why are you at this party tonight?”

“Simple, I went to school with William. When I had business in town, I looked him up. He’s been very helpful business-wise, and I’m enjoying the friendship with him and Margie.”

“Why are you here?” he asked.

A waiter appeared and excused his interruption. “Sorry. They’re about to cut the cake inside. All guests are asked in for the toast.”

“Thank you.” She nodded, and turned back to Chance. “I have to be there.”

Taking a deep breath, she left him alone at the table. He sat for a moment then noticed the small egg-shaped purse on the side of the table, wondering if there would be a small golden carriage inside. Laughing out loud, he dropped it in his pocket. Pausing next to the waiter he said, “If the young lady comes back for her purse, please tell her I have it.”

“Of course, sir.”

He continued to gather dishes and debris while Chance went back to the ballroom, entering in time to be handed a glass of champagne by another passing waiter. He was struck by the line of people that had been posed for the official picture. William and Margie stood in the center, next to Margie stood Anna, then April. He wondered about the relationship between them, thinking he would ask William tomorrow afternoon when they met at the club. As soon as the camera was through, Anna gave the couple a joint hug, their laughter seemingly annoying April and Scott. The chill running through him wasn’t from the cold. He made his way slowly through the crowd, meeting her near the balcony door.

“You left this on the table. I didn’t want to leave it out there.”

“Thank you.” His hand was large, holding the purse in his palm. Her fingers brushed his skin as she took it from him. In that moment alone, Chance knew he was in trouble.

“Can I see you home tonight, Ileana?” Her eyes flashed to his, and he watched as she stiffened, a mask sliding into place, omitting the warm smile to a staid, practiced look. “Only to the door.”

“Thank you, no.” She took a step back, breathing deeply before she chose to look again. “It was nice to meet you, Chance. Maybe we’ll meet in another elevator someday.” She turned on her heel and was ready to leave when Scott appeared.

She’s right, he thought, I could smell his cologne before he got here.

“Leaving so soon, pet?”

“Yes, Scott.”

Chance made a snap decision and took a step toward her. “Will and Margie are over there. We should say good-night before we leave.” Anna smiled back, not countering his suggestion, only nodding.

“Well, a real date, Anna. What do you two have planned for the rest of the evening, or shouldn’t I ask.” Scott let out a cynical laugh. “Oh, right, been there, done that already.”

Chance had him by the front of the shirt with one hand. While reaching for him, he had maneuvered Scott’s back to the crowd. “Never say it again. Apologize to the lady.” Chance held him with just enough force to let him know what he was capable of. Noting that April was nearing, he released his grip. Scott settled back, an indignant glare pasted across his face.

“She’s not worth the effort.” Scott hissed through his teeth.

April put her arm around Scott’s shoulders. “What were you talking about?”

“I was telling them we didn’t think the new cafe on Seventy-second was worth the bother.” Scott’s voice was amazingly calm.

“Oh, yes, I quite agree.”

“It was nice to have met you both,” said Chance. “Anna, we should be going.”

“Good-night, April.” Again, they kissed the air. Anna only nodded to Scott.

* * * *

On automatic pilot, they made their way to the couple, gave their thanks for a lovely party, and wished them well. The elevator was crowded and neither said a word. Once they hit the lobby, Chance guided her toward a small seating area, off the main entrance. Anna sat next to him on a long sofa, watching as several people from the party filtered past.

“What would you like to do?” She gave him a strange look. “I mean, do you want me to leave you alone or should we share a taxi until we’re away from here?”

Without a second thought, Anna answered. “I’m hungry. How about I buy you a burger as thanks for helping me out tonight?” She didn’t look to him, but she seemed to be inspecting the purse in great detail.

“Yes to the burger, no to you paying.” He put up his hand to silence her and was rewarded with an icy glare.

“I don’t talk to the hand, Mr. Walker.” She was standing before he knew it.

“I only meant that there is no discussion about who pays. I’m from the old school. The man pays, got it?”

“Oh, I’m beginning to get it, Chance Walker, but are you up for it?” The flash that ran through her face told him he had been right earlier. He was in trouble where she was concerned. But just because she had green eyes and was tall like his Halloween tryst, he couldn’t turn her into that woman. He wanted to spend time with her, get to know her.

The air had turned colder while they had been at the engagement party. As soon they were outside, Anna paused and stretched. She glanced around them then slipped her arm through his.

“Mind if we walk?”

“No, not at all. Where are we going?” He watched her smile, and followed her lead. Still early, just before eleven, she took him to the landmark nighttime deli. Once seated in a back booth, Chance realized, even in florescent lighting, she was still beautiful.

“Why did you hesitate at the elevator last week?” Chance was searching for neutral ground and decided he wanted the answers to his questions. She simply smiled while the waiter brought his beer and her cream soda.

“I was checking to make sure the security camera was working.” She paused, watching him, then decided to continue. “Just habit, I suppose. Don’t take it personally.”

“What if it hadn’t been on?”

“I’d have waited for a different elevator.” She smiled broadly, as a plate was placed in front of her.

He liked the sparkle in her eyes derived from something as simple as a pastrami sandwich. He liked it more that she actually ate the large concoction, along with the fries and coleslaw that trimmed the plate. “What if the car is empty when you get on, then someone enters at a different floor?”

“Calculated risk, but I always feel better if I know the cameras are on.”

“Do you work in the building?” he asked between bites.

“I’m a freelance graphic artist. One of my clients is an advertising agency. Their offices are in that building.”

“How do you know Margie?” He sipped his beer before it went warm.

“We’re best friends from grade school. We’ve managed to stay in touch for over twenty years.” She paused and dipped a French fry in ketchup before eating it in one bite.

“What about William, have you known him a long time too?”

“No,” she said, smiling. “He was Margie’s find. But I think they’ll be good together. They’re both older and wiser, so I hope their marriage will work.”

Pushing the plate forward, Chance laughed out loud as he noted only a small crust of bread remained on the plate along with two overdone French fries.

“I suppose the eating like a bird comment has to be revised.”

“Dispels some rumors, I suppose.” She savored the last sips of the soda. “Chance, why did you...help me tonight?”

“Help you?” He tried to figure out what she meant.

“I mean with Scott. You could have walked away, yet you chose not to.” He watched as she settled back into the cushioned vinyl bench. “You’re still new around town. I’m not sure being seen with me will help you.”

Chance wasn’t sure what she was getting at, but he was amazed she seemed resigned to it, whatever it was. She caught him staring and watched him blush slightly, and he felt his cheeks heat at being caught watching her. Reaching across the table, he took her hand, lightly turning it over in his. Without looking up, he knew his answer obviously pleased her.

“Last week, I promised myself that if I ever saw you again, I wouldn’t let you walk away, at least not without taking a chance to get to know you better.” She laughed lightly.

“Been hanging out in the building’s lobby waiting all week?” Her humor matched his, but his eyes told her he was serious.

“No, I’m setting up a small office on the fourteenth floor. That’s why I was in the building.”

“Damn, I think I’m disappointed. I somehow liked the visual image of you standing in the lobby with a newspaper, watching for me. Ah well.”

He caught her gaze and they both laughed until the waiter passed, dropping the check on the table. Both of them eyed it then, quite calmly, Anna handed it to him.

“If you can afford offices in that building, you can afford to buy me a sandwich.” He watched as she drew a ten-dollar bill from the small egg, dropping it on the table. “At least I can leave the tip.” She was standing, waiting for him before he could manage an answer.

Back outside, they waited on the corner of Seventh and Fifty-fifth for a taxi. As one pulled to a stop, he wondered what to do next.

“Will I see you again?”

“Maybe.” She smiled, then leaned up and kissed his cheek lightly. “Thanks for the pastrami. Take care, Chance.” She was in the taxi and away from him before it registered that he had meant to see her home. Her kiss had so totally disarmed him. He stood on the corner for several minutes, lost in the feel of her silky cheek and soft lips pressing against his skin.

* * * *

Anna wondered about Chance. She imagined he must have shaved before going to the party. With his dark hair, he would have had a five o’clock shadow, and he didn’t when her lips grazed his cheek. He smelled of fresh soap and rainwater with a hint of cherry mixed in. It reminded her of the pipe tobacco her grandfather used years ago. Then she remembered the men on the balcony with cigars after the cake was cut.

She kept asking herself, Who was this guy? Margie had disappeared from her side long before she had a chance to ask about him, and she refused to give anyone else at the party the satisfaction of her asking about him. That would only lead to more gossip, something she definitely didn’t need.

Anna had tried not to stare at him openly. It was difficult because of his silver-gray eyes. His dark hair was combed back with his large

fingers, leaving it looking bedroom tousled. His shoulders were made for a woman's hands running along them. While dancing he'd kept a polite distance between them, frustrating her when she would have liked to feel him fully against her.

What bothered her about him was his hesitancy to give her any details of his business or personal life. What she liked about him was the way he teased her, not malicious like Scott. There were no cutting or hurtful remarks from Chance Walker. Which left her exactly where she was, in a taxi on the way home, alone. It would be best to find out more about him before getting too involved with him.

Lying in bed that night, she used her fingers to circle her clit, slipping her index finger inside her pussy occasionally. She closed her eyes and tried to picture it being his hand. All she could visualize was her cowboy in a mask from so long ago. It didn't matter. She climaxed remembering how he fucked her pussy from behind and fingered her anus until she came.

Chapter Three

Dropping his bag in the foyer, Chance looked at the mail stacked on the small table. He picked up the pile, glanced through them, carrying the stack with him into the spare room he had turned into an office. Tossing them onto the desk, he left his laptop along with the newspaper and headed to the kitchen. There he found a plate of oatmeal raisin cookies waiting for him. He slipped the plastic off, taking two of them with him, eating as he walked through the large apartment.

Propped on the piano was a note from Lottie. She had class until five, was going to stay at her friend Bridget's for supper and go back to school with her for a recital. She would be home around eleven. Chance glanced at his watch, saw it was just after four, and decided to get some work done.

Sitting at the desk, he managed to get through the mail and the messages. By seven, he was showered and bored. No, not bored, he thought, restless. He had Anna's address and phone number in his wallet, and he wondered if he should call her or not. It was starting to make him crazy.

All the time he was in Texas, he couldn't get her off his mind. Somewhere in the recesses of his memory, he knew he had met her before or at least seen her, but he couldn't be sure she was his Halloween fling from so long ago. It would be unfair to imagine her as that woman just because she left him wanting more. Maybe it was only in his dreams. William had been hesitant to give him much information about her, relenting only with the barest of information, the address and phone number.

“Find out for yourself, old buddy. I’m much too busy to set you up.” But as they had been leaving the club, William had surprised him again. “Chance, I like Anna. She’s a great lady, but she comes with baggage. Just be careful. I wouldn’t like to see her get hurt, and I know it would bother Margie.” That bomb dropped, William had hurried away, leaving Chance to fill in all the details for himself. He had a vivid imagination, and had spent much of the last week wondering about her.

“What’s the worst that can happen? She’ll blow me off,” he said aloud as he was dialing the phone. On the fourth ring, it was picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hi. Can I speak with Ileanna? This is Chance Walker.” There was a long pause. He could almost visualize her mind working, making up her mind.

“Hello, Chance. How are you?”

“Fine, I just got back. I’ve been back home.”

“Where is home? New York or Texas?” This was not the conversation he had imagined.

“Neither, really. I suppose home is Long Island.” He paused then went on before she could interrupt. “Come out to supper with me, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

“Sorry. Not tonight. I’m working on a deadline.”

“What are you working on?” He heard her exasperated sigh.

“I can’t. I’m really under the gun here. How about if I call you next week?”

“How about I bring dinner to you?” Another pause, then his death sentence.

“No, but thanks anyway. Once I eat, I never get back to work. I really do have to finish this.”

“All right. Another time then. Good night, Ileanna.”

“Night, Chance. Thanks for thinking of me.”

* * * *

For a moment he didn't think she was home. Then when he was about to leave, he heard the sound of locks being flipped. Slowly she opened the door to him. The sight of her stopped the breath he was about to take. Her hair was still that mass of curls, but several colored pencils were tucked behind her ear. She had on well-worn jeans, the knees merely threads holding the material together. Bare feet were adorned with only the slightest hint of pink toe polish. She had on a man's shirt, large enough to fall to the thinning knees. It was stained and splotted with ink and paint of all colors. The left sleeve had a series of long black stripes, starting thick, and then running to hair-thin lines. A paintbrush was in her hand.

"I figured if you were working, you still had to eat." He hoped his grin didn't give away his nervousness. Shifting the bag, he used it to hide his instant arousal.

"What if I wasn't home or had lied about working?" She leaned in the doorframe, her arms folded in front of her. He took in the sight of her, wondering if she had somehow wished he would do something crazy like this.

"I suppose Gus and I would have had dinner together then." She threw back her head and laughed, allowing him to enter.

Chance knew the odds were even if he showed up unannounced, she might be home working and thankful for a break. He also knew that she might not be home, or if she was, she might not be alone.

"I decided to take a chance. I stopped by earlier and introduced myself to Gus. After reassuring him of my good intentions and his warnings to my well-being, he relented after I showed him William's business card with your address and phone number on the back."

"So you introduced yourself to my door man?" She stayed leaning against the doorframe, not letting him enter.

“He told me you hadn’t placed any food orders yet and loved the Chinese take-out from Yings, two blocks over.” Chance held back a grin of self satisfaction at being so cunning.

“And?”

“And I decided the worst that could happen was I’d wind up with a lot of food if you weren’t home or interested.”

He had left, wandered around the city, and then gone back with the take-out. He dropped off a smaller bag with Gus, a thank you for the restaurant tip, hoping the meal he provided would ease both their consciences.

Gus had accepted the meal, but warned Chance that he had fifteen minutes to make his pitch to Anna. If he wasn’t back by then, Gus was going to call up and make sure everything was all right. In the elevator he wondered what her response would be to him showing up at her door.

“I decided on a late supper myself, so I figured you might like to join me.”

Anna gave him a long glance then looked down at her own clothing, laughing aloud. “You got me. I can’t resist the smell of the food. Come in, and I’ll take a break. The food will help take my headache away.”

He followed her through a small, nondescript hallway, through a second door, etched glass, he noted. With a quick glance, he saw it was a weeping willow tree. As it opened before her, his first sight was that of the city skyline, its lights glinting against the dark night sky. A wall of glass wrapped the corner of the building, and an L-shaped balcony followed along, about ten feet further out.

She watched as he stood motionless, taking in the view. “I know, it’s stunning, isn’t it? I can’t imagine living anywhere else that didn’t have the view this place does.”

He stood transfixed, finally taking in the room around him. It was a formal room, tastefully done in white leather and chrome. It didn’t look lived in. Taking the bag from him, she went on. “I can’t take

credit for the living room. My grandmother had it designed in the seventies. I can't decide how to change it, so I've just left it alone."

He followed her voice down the hall to the right, passing several closed doors, to the wide arch at the end. There he paused, watching her unload the meal he had brought.

Her kitchen was fit for a gourmet chef. Copper pots hung from racks over the long stonework island. All the counters matched, except for one wall. Those he noticed were topped with white marble. He saw the rolling pins hung on the wall overhead, realizing it was a baking area. The cobalt blue canisters announced that they held flour and sugar. Above that area ran a long bookshelf, jammed with cookbooks. The double stainless steel ovens banked along the far wall were offset by the cooktop in the center of the other wall. Six burners with a grill. *Who does she cook for?*

Ileanna read his mind as he watched her from the doorway. "Yes, I can cook."

He smiled, slightly ashamed that he assumed she didn't. "You got me."

"Come and grab these plates while I put on some water for tea." He went willingly, helping her to set the small table in the windowed corner. They worked quietly, listening to the soundtrack from Fantasia that had been on when he arrived. Once they were all set, she motioned for him to sit, offering him a beer before she sat. With the white cardboard containers opened on the table between them, the intercom rang.

"I forgot. Gus told me I had fifteen minutes, and he would check on you." He reached for a fried dumpling, pausing only to dunk it in hot mustard. Just as he was about to take the first bite, she passed him and took it from his fingers, finishing it in two bites before she answered the kitchen intercom.

"It's all right, Gus. I'll send you down a plate...oh, I see. Thanks. Have a good evening."

* * * *

Originally, she'd been sorry she'd automatically dismissed his invitation. There were several weeks left before her deadline. She dismissed the idea and went back to work until the doorbell rang near ten. Anna wondered who it was. Gus hadn't called up to announce a guest. Checking the peephole, she started to giggle when she saw Chance waiting, a large brown shopping bag in his arms. She took a moment to gather herself and her thoughts enough to stop laughing, finally opening the door to him.

He was dressed similar to the first day they met in the elevator. Soft, worn jeans and boots, a light flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled back over a dark tee shirt. Anna held back laughing aloud at what she must look like to him. Instead, she'd made the instant decision to accept his offer. Now he was sitting in her kitchen and making her feel things she never did before. She'd heard about chemical reactions, but never experienced it for herself.

They ate in relative silence for the first few minutes. Once her headache subsided, she sat back and took a breath. The kettle had boiled. She was making the tea when she finally spoke. "Thank you for supper, Chance, but why?"

"Does there always have to be an alternative motive? I was hungry, thought you might be too." She didn't smile, but went about bringing the cups and pot to the table.

"How was your trip home? On the phone you told me Long Island was your home. Want to explain?" He pushed back slightly from the table, stretching his legs to the side.

"I grew up in Texas. My dad and stepmother are still there. Dad keeps an eye on the business of the ranch for me, and I keep an eye on Lottie's winery out on the Island. She's my half sister." He watched her digest the information along with a pancake stuffed with duck, garlic, and wild plum sauce. She noted he picked at his plate, stealing glances at her.

“I’m still confused. Why doesn’t she watch her own winery?”

He finished what was on his plate, pushing it to the side, pouring them both fresh tea, then started to explain. “My dad met my stepmom, Charlotte, when I was working for her, just out of college. He came to visit me, trying to talk me into coming back to the ranch, and they met. Their daughter, Charlotte, we call her Lottie, is only just fifteen and studying here at Julliard.”

“Why is the winery Lottie’s and not Charlottes?”

“Technically it is, or her half is. It’s in trust for Lottie when she comes of age. Until then, Charlotte has control.” He paused, reaching for the right words. “Charlotte was married once before, an arranged marriage, and widowed. When she and Dad met that first time, there was an instant connection between them. My mother had passed when I was still in high school.”

“Chance, I’m sorry. It must have been difficult for you.”

“That’s a different talk, okay?”

“All right, don’t let me interrupt.” She cradled the hot tea cup in her hands, listening to his words, until he seemed to run out of steam, trying to explain it all. “Let me see if I have this straight? Charlotte’s husband was killed in an accident, but it was originally his winery. When your dad realized he was attracted to her, he started to visit you more often.”

“On the pretext of ranch business, that lasted the entire first visit. After that, he didn’t pretend so hard. He kept up the pretext with Charlotte for almost two years, and then Lottie was born.”

“That must have been an interesting time at work for you?”

“Actually, it was, but not how you’d think. Charlotte always wanted a child. She was thrilled. Once dad realized it was his child, he was even happier. They married on Lottie’s first birthday.”

“I think that’s sweet.”

“Yeah, but Dad still prefers Texas and Charlotte is comfortable there too. So, I run the winery, which is really what I wanted to do all along, Lottie studies at music school, and dad keeps an eye on the

ranch. Since she and I each own half the ranch now, I have to keep my hand in it. But my heart is with the vines out on the North Fork of Long Island.”

“So you each own half of each property?”

“Yes. When Dad and Charlotte married, they combined everything then turned it over to a trust for Lottie and me. Pretty smart move actually. This way, we all get what we want. I keep a hand in the ranch, and I get to spend time, guiltlessly, with the vines.”

“I’ve only seen you drink sparkling water and beer, never wine. Do you drink anything besides your own label?” Chance’s eyes sparkled, and she loved him instantly. Her comment had been meant as a taunt, and he had the sense of humor to acknowledge it.

“I enjoy most wines, except for the heavy Bordeaux. But since we don’t make one...actually the night of the engagement party, I was walking off a headache, hence the water.”

“What about champagne?”

“I enjoy it, but we don’t bottle one.”

“If Lottie is studying at Julliard, does she picture having an interest in either the ranch or the winery?”

“Not really, but that was the smart part. Dad knew I wouldn’t let either go unattended, since it was part Lottie’s too. When she decides to retire someday, she can decide then if she wants to become active in either.”

“Tell me more about the label?”

It was after eleven thirty when Chance glanced at the kitchen clock and paused. He stood, clearing the coffee cups she had set before them after their meal was finished.

“Okay, Anna, if we’re going to spend time together, then you have to promise me that you’ll cut me off when I get started on wine making. I’ve been told I have a tendency to go on about it.”

“All right, agreed. But I am confused. Why do you need an office in Manhattan?”

“Easier really, right now. I don’t need to be on the island every day, and it leaves me time to spend with Lottie.”

“All very well and nice, Chance, but you don’t open offices on Park Avenue for a place to go every day. Not a man like you.” She surveyed him through squinted eyes. “When you’re ready, you’ll tell me.”

She could tell her words surprised him. He was probably used to people trying to pick at him for information. He helped her load the dishwasher, and then placed the wax paper bag on the counter in front of her. It held two fortune cookies.

“Ladies first.” He nodded to the cookies. Anna only shook her head. She took one, snapping it open, enjoying the almond essence of the first bite. He watched as she took the white fortune paper and placed it face down on the counter.

“I don’t want to know what it says.”

Chance broke the second cookie, smiling when he read his fortune. “A good deed doesn’t go unrewarded.”

Without thinking about it, Anna leaned across the stone counter, kissing his cheek lightly. “Thank you for supper.”

“You’re welcome.” He folded the paper and put it in his shirt pocket. “My fortune was right.” He held her gaze, searching for a hint to what made her mind work.

“How about yours?” He nodded to the slip of paper still lying on the counter.

“I don’t believe in them.” She turned from him, setting about shutting down the kitchen. She watched him retrieve the paper and put it with his. What bothered her was the wide smile he revealed when he read it.

“I didn’t realize how late it was. I’d better get going.”

“I’ll walk you out.”

* * * *

He followed her down the hallway and knew he saw her hesitate at the studio door and then keep going. She paused in front of a second etched-glass door. He didn't follow her, standing transfixed at the work of art before him. Its central figure was a nymph-like goddess, sitting on a rock, the ocean waves behind her. That was encased in an intricate carved rope of glass, holding in a second layer of etched glass, which fit into a heavy oak frame. She was waiting at the end of the hallway.

"I've never seen anything like it."

"And you won't again." He gave her a puzzled look. "A project from my college days."

"You did this? I'm...stunned isn't quite the right word. I didn't know."

"Thank you. I was happy with the end result. But I have no illusions that I ever want to tackle another project like it." She laughed, leaning against the wall. "It's a great medium, but a piece of my soul went into her." She didn't offer to show him the rest of the apartment, thankful he didn't ask to see it.

Anna realized she'd been staring at him. "Sorry, lost me there for a minute."

"It's okay. What time does Gus go off shift?"

"He's on until midnight." Chance glanced at his watch. It was eleven forty-five.

"I'll be going. I'd like to say good-night to him."

"And protect my reputation in the process?"

"Something like that. Thanks for having supper with me. I'll call you." He kissed her lips lightly, and turned away. He was closing the hall door when she caught it.

"Chance?"

"Yes, Ileana?" He watched her face intently.

"Good-night." Slowly, she closed the door. She had no doubt he'd make a point of nodding to Gus on the way out.

Chapter Four

“Thank you for meeting me, Grandfather.” Anna bent down and kissed his cheek, returning his warm hug. When she was seated and they had ordered, she studied him as he pushed back in his chair. He admitted to seventy-five, but once again she wondered if he hadn’t fudged a bit. Anyone meeting him for the first time would judge him to be in his early sixties.

“So, what’s this all about, Ileanna?” She smiled at his special look and drew a deep breath. “If it was business, you would have come to the office.”

“I used to hate my name when I was younger, but it seems you’re the only one who calls me that anymore.” No, she thought, Chance calls you that sometimes. When he seems serious about something. She brushed aside a wave of emotions, forcing herself to continue. “I would like you to have someone checked out for me. Discretely, Grandfather, please?” His fingers went into their church steeple position as they always did when he was thinking something over.

“Who and why?”

“Because I don’t want to put myself in the same position I did nine years ago?”

“A man then. Tell me about him?”

“That’s just it. I don’t know much.” She whispered his name, trying not to smile. “I first saw him in an elevator at the Seagram building a few weeks ago. Then he was at Margie and Will’s engagement party.” She paused, thinking back. “Actually, it was the elevator at the hotel before the party.”

Waiting while their omelets were served, they were both relieved when the waiter left. Leaning over her plate slightly, Anna looked him in the eye. "He could be just what he says he is...and not. Remember Grandmother used to say, what was it, 'Shame on you for fooling me once, shame on me for being fooled twice,' or something like that. Anyway, before I let any emotions get in the way, I want to know what and who I'm dealing with." Sighing heavily, she put her fork to the fluffy egg concoction, only picking at the edge.

Anna was nudged back to the present, seeing a heavily buttered roll placed in front of her. Her eyes filled before she could choke them back, but she met his eyes with her watery gaze anyway. He squeezed her hand, smiling. After devouring the fresh baked bread, she actually had an appetite. It was something he had done since she was a child, prompting her to eat her favorite, buttered bread. Somehow, she always seemed to find her appetite after the starchy morsel.

"I've made a list of what I know about him, information that he's given me. Also, I listed what Margie has contributed."

Louis Jennings took the envelope offered by his only grandchild. Slipping on his reading glasses, he quickly scanned both pages.

"Says U.C. Berkeley then NYU Law."

"He said he knew William in school, but he didn't specify."

"I'll see what I can find out for you." He signaled the waiter, who arrived with their coffee. "Now that we're finished with business, how's the latest story going?"

Anna admitted she was further ahead than she had projected, but it helped that she liked the style of the story and could visualize it vividly. It made her illustrations that much stronger and vibrant. Almost as an afterthought, she added, "I just remembered something. Chance made friends with Gus, real quick. He even let him up one night last week without calling ahead." She grabbed Louis' hand. "He waited ten minutes then called and checked if I really wanted company." He relaxed, but wasn't happy. "You see, that was my same

reaction. Gus has never done that for anyone before, why Chance Walker? And, at the party, he didn't seem happy to find Scott there, although in fairness, he didn't seem to like him before he knew he was my ex-husband."

Louis shrugged his shoulders, trying to hide the grin.

"I know, let it go, Grandfather, I have. It's the only way to stay sane."

"Yes, dear."

"That's the tone you used to use on Grandmother when you wanted to appease her, and she knew it too."

"Yes, but she was far too well-mannered to let it show." They both burst out laughing, enjoying their memories of the woman they both held so dear. "Go on, you were talking about the party and Scott."

"Oh, right. I was saying good night to Chance when Scott came by with one of his rude comments. Grandfather, before I knew it, he had Scott by the front of the shirt, his feet barely touching the floor. He wanted him to apologize to me for the comment."

"How did that scene end?" He leaned forward over his coffee cup, enjoying her storytelling.

"It never really started. April was approaching and Chance had turned him away from the party. Nobody but the three of us really knew what was happening."

"Did his display bother you?"

"Yes and no. I didn't feel threatened by him, although Scott did, I'm sure. And while I hate to admit it, it felt kind of nice to have someone stand up for me." It was evident to both of them she was uncomfortable with the emotion.

"You are in deep here, girl." She nodded. "Give me forty-eight hours, and I'll see what I can come up with."

"Come to supper Thursday night."

"I should have something by then."

“You come to supper every Thursday night. I want you there for you, not just your information.”

“I know, child.” He rose from the table, checking his watch. “I’m due at the office in twenty minutes. Where are you heading?”

“For a long walk home. I’m going to avoid working at the office until I can make a decision on how I want to handle Chance.”

“Smart girl. I’ll call you.”

“Thank you, Grandfather.” She waited while his limousine pulled out into the early morning traffic, then turned and headed home.

Anna window-shopped her way home, enjoying the sun. Chance Walker had all but consumed her mind since he stopped by last week. Then the message he would be in Texas for a few days. He had left her a phone number which she had copied down, but hadn’t called. She didn’t know if he was back in town yet. She didn’t want to know. Mainly, she hoped to avoid him until she knew more about him.

* * * *

Chance sat in the co-pilot seat of the private airplane he and his family used to get from New York to Dallas and back. It had been one of his sticking points about staying involved with the ranch. He had piloted the first half of the flight then turned over the controls to his pilot when the phone rang. His laptop open, he cradled the phone against his ear while bringing up his e-mail. “Yes, I’ve got it.” He scrolled down the pages quickly, listening to the person on the phone while scanning the information in front of him. “Nothing about modeling or acting?”

“All right, but keep checking. Let me know what you find out.” He closed both the phone and the computer, leaning back in the chair, enjoying the clear sky around him. Where had he seen her before? For a while, he figured it was just because he wanted to believe it was the resemblance to his Halloween fling, but inside, he knew he had seen this woman before. It was there in the back of his brain, somewhere.

Retrieving it was the problem. There would be a stack of faxes waiting at his home office. He didn't think twice about it, knowing that Lottie and Charlotte were both on vacation this week, still in Texas. No one else would see them before he did. Chance let his pilot land the plane, anxious to be back at the apartment.

He let himself drift off to sleep in the back seat of the car, letting the driver do his job. The rush hour traffic would keep them ensnarled for at least another hour. He couldn't concentrate on work, although, he had to admit he was pretty proud of himself. Everything seemed to be running smoothly, almost too smoothly, he thought. Closing his eyes, her face floated in front of him. He pictured her as she was that first day in the elevator, then at the party how repulsed she seemed when her ex-husband invaded her space.

He had wanted to kiss her good night when he left last week, but thought better of it. Instead, he let his lips graze against her, a small token to hold him over. That was his problem. He didn't want to have to think when it came to Anna. Until he knew for sure, he would keep his distance. Her image floated away, changing to a grainy black and white image he just couldn't quite make out. Waking with a start, he realized they had passed through the tunnel and were almost to the apartment. Rubbing his temples, he silently cursed himself for falling asleep. His head ached.

Longing for a shower, he forced himself to deal with the have-tos before going to the office for his faxes. He ordered a pizza and jumped in the shower. He had just poured a glass of his favorite white wine when the bell rang. "Umberto's delivery on the way up, Mr. Walker."

"Thank you," he buzzed back, heading back to the master bedroom for sweat pants. He opened the door just as the deliveryman exited the elevator. Locked away, with his pizza and wine, Chance finally let himself look at the pages before him. They were in chronological order, newspaper blurbs about her family he scanned quickly.

Grandparents Louis and Edna Jennings, part of New York and Newport's prime social circle. He read on, born to his son, Louis, Jr. and Anna Jennings, a daughter, October, 1981. No other children, father killed in Viet Nam, mother deceased, 1999. No cause was listed, and he wondered about her parents. Reading on, he found that Edna, or Eddie as she had been referred to in as many articles, had suffered with cancer and lost her battle only two years ago. There were copies of yearbook photos and, finally, what he had been waiting for. Slowly he took in the photo of Ileanna Jennings and Scott Armstrong, announcing their engagement. She was only twenty, just a year after her mother died. "I wonder if she married him for love or companionship?" he said aloud, a flash of his emotional memories of his mother's death coming to mind. Next was a copy of the wedding notice. She had been a beautiful bride, but somehow he thought she still seemed sad.

The thought of Scott being her husband burned at his stomach. He knew it was crazy. He hardly knew this woman, but it still incensed him. Finally, the next page was from the society column. It claimed, rather tactlessly, that Scott had been caught in a compromising position with another woman and Ileanna Jennings Armstrong had pulled the plug on their marriage.

"Good for you, Anna." Pride in her eased his stomach, but he knew he couldn't dwell on the fact that Scott Armstrong had treated her so badly. Letting himself finally examine it more thoroughly, he knew it was because Scott had touched her intimately. There was nothing he could do about it. "Let it go. You can't change history."

The rest of the pages were from the tabloids. The front page of one showed a picture of a pale Ileanna wearing a dark suit with sunglasses, exiting from a court building. She held the arm of an older man. "Louis," he decided. The rest of the cover was a split photo of Scott and April, kissing on the same staircase outside the same building. He read the article, dismissed it, and went on. The remaining pages held just about the same information. Heiress dumps unfaithful

husband. Best friend's cousin steps in to take her place. He put the pages in a file, tossing them into the safe, just in case. Sipping his second glass of wine, he remembered her saying that she might not be good for his image. Was she referring to the divorce? His mind wandered, and he kept coming back to the wedding photo. Her hair had been longer, layered and teased against the veil of white. The long-sleeved, high-necked gown had been stunning on her, smoothing to her slim waist.

This wasn't getting him anywhere, except confused. He went to bed, tossed for several hours, and then gave up. Dressed by four AM, he walked to the office, surprising even the lobby guards. By ten, his days' work was finished. He knew what he wanted to do with the rest of his free time, but chose not to. Not until he knew a little more. Then came the phone call.

Chapter Five

Pushing back from the table, Louis smiled back at Ileanna. She had, as always, managed to cook the perfect meal for them.

“The asparagus vinaigrette was delicious and you grilled our steaks to perfection. The baked potato is still my favorite.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” she answered, winding their conversation back to his research. “So his Park Avenue office is to expand the winery nationally?”

“Seems about right. From what I’ve gathered, the label should hold its own. Once Chance took over, its reputation has glowed with awards.”

“He has a touch for the vines, then, the earth and elements?”

“His ranch does well too.” Louis paused when the intercom rang.

Anna had been filling the dishwasher. She looked to Louis, questioning if he expected anyone. His shoulder only shrugged. “Yes, Gus?”

“Mr. Walker is wondering if he might be allowed to visit.” She looked to Louis, who had immediately placed his hands in that church position again. They were both too curious to turn him away.

“Tell Mr. Walker he’s just in time for coffee, Gus.” She hesitated, and then added, “Please call me back once he’s on the elevator.”

“He likes to stop by unannounced,” Louis said as he passed her the plates.

“In all fairness, last time he called, I put him off. Maybe he figured it was the only way?”

The intercom rang and Anna rushed to it. “Gus, did Mr. Walker ask you to announce him or was it your choice?”

“No, Ms. Jennings. He came and asked how I was, and would I please ring up to let you know he was here.”

“I see.”

“I appreciate that he did that, Miss. Last time I was uncomfortable letting him up unannounced.”

“Thank you, Gus. Have a good evening.”

“Good night, Ms. Jennings.”

Both she and Louis looked at each other. Finally, she told him, “I’m glad in a way. Now you’ll get to meet him.” She ran her hand through her hair, Louis smiling at her.

“You go fix up, and I’ll let him in. I want to see his face when a man answers the door.” She kissed his cheek lightly as she headed to her bedroom. Once there, she checked that the dark trousers and white shirt she wore were still without spots. She reapplied her lipstick and was about to fluff her hair, then thought better of it. Her bell rang just as she re-entered the kitchen. Choosing to hear their first words, she quietly snuck down the hall.

“Hello.”

“Hello. You must be Mr. Walker? Please come in.”

“Thank you. And you’re Louis Jennings, Anna’s grandfather.”

“Yes, how did you know?” She knew both men still stood in the front foyer. Sizing each other up, she mused.

“I read the papers. Nice to meet you. I hope I haven’t interrupted a private evening?”

“We were just about to have coffee. Why not join us?” Anna backtracked to the kitchen before they could find her listening. “Have a seat. I’ll let Anna know you’re here.” Louis left him in the white living room, meeting her back in the kitchen, only raising an eyebrow to her.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” she told him. Anna wanted them to have some time together before changing the dynamic of the situation. Louis left her, realizing what she had in mind. Returning to the living room, Chance was staring at the skyline.

“Quite a view.” He didn’t startle him as much as bring him back to the present.

“Yes, quite. I always figured a water view was the only kind, but this is impressive.”

“Have a seat. Anna will be in shortly with coffee.”

The two men sat across from each other, the chrome and glass coffee table separating them. Anna stood in the hall once again, listening to them talk. She heard Louis ask how he met her, and Chance gave him an accurate rendition of the meeting. They both laughed when he added the second time was also in an elevator. She decided to enter when they were in a high spot.

Chance stood as she came through the doorway, taking the wooden tray from her hands. He watched her, devouring her with his glance. A chill ran through her, and she felt she might blush. Thankful only the balcony lights were one, it left them in a semi-dark setting. She went about pouring their coffees, opting to sit in the armchair away from them both. Listening to Chance and Louis converse about sports, New York traffic, and some of their favorite restaurants, the hit finally came.

“I’m very glad you’re here tonight, Louis. I wanted to talk to Ileana, but you may be interested in this.” He put his cup down on the table, then stood, wandered a moment to collect his thoughts, and finally leaned on the back of the couch he had been sitting on, for support. “I’ve been away, back home in Texas for a few days. It seems while I was there, someone has taken great pains to find out more about me, my business and personal information. Rather clumsily I might add.”

Anna watched with her poker face on. Louis did the same. Chance watched them both, waiting for a sign. When neither said anything, he continued.

“I’ve done some investigating and it seems that Scott Armstrong has developed a keen interest in my life.”

Louis was visibly startled at his words. Anna had been expecting him to call him on the background check he did for her. Hearing Scott had done the same, however clumsily, took her back a step. Anna couldn't hold the gasp.

Chance watched them both intently. Anna was obviously surprised, but Louis was the one he seemed more interested in.

"Surprised? I was." He came back to the couch, pausing only to refill his coffee before sitting. Silence held for a long moment then Louis stood, walking to the bar. He poured three brandies, handing one to each of them before taking his and returning to his seat.

"I had expected Ileanna to do some checking. In all fairness, I've done some of my own." He kept Louis's eye. "I know, I'm not proud of it, but I had to know. I'm about to expand my business...I had to know for sure." Louis only nodded. They both knew the reason for the Park Avenue office was the expansion of the winery and its plans of going national in the next season.

"I'm too stunned to find words for how I feel right now," Anna whispered, but both men looked to her as she stood and paced behind the sofa. "I'm angry. What right has he? I'm annoyed. He has no business checking on anyone in relation to me." Louis went to her, took her hand, and brought her back to the couch to sit beside him.

"Chance, the expansion, what would be the worst case scenario?"

"I suppose there could be several problems created. If he managed to get the financial backing pulled or if he tainted the label name before we establish it." Chance stood, pushing his hands in the back pockets of his jeans. "Hell, since I found out, I've hired a private security firm to keep an eye on the grounds and the cellars." He stopped, and then looked at Anna. "I'm sorry to say this in front of you, Anna, but the man is scum. His bio reads like a..." He turned from them. "I'm sorry, Ileanna. I went too far. I understand at one time you must have loved him." His voice caught in his throat. Louis didn't seem to notice. Anna did. He watched as she only nodded. Louis still held her hand.

“No apology necessary. We know the guttersnipe we’re dealing with. Hiring security for a while is probably a good idea.”

“It’s my fault. If you hadn’t shown an interest in me, none of this would have happened.” Her voice trailed off. “Grandfather?”

“It’s your decision to make, Anna. I can’t make it for you.” She put her brandy on the table, turning to Chance.

“Scott has a vicious streak. If he thinks hurting you will force you away from me, he won’t stop until he’s satisfied he’s come between us. I’m sorry, Chance. I never meant for this to happen. I thought, now that he was married to April, he wouldn’t...”

“Has he done this before?”

“Yes,” Louis answered firmly. “The last man ran with his tail between his legs. That was several years back. We figured his marriage had ended all this.”

“He wasn’t important, Grandfather, just an acquaintance.”

“I’m not running away, but I do need information. What am I dealing with and how far does his reach extend?”

“Not as far as he would like it to, although, he can probably stir up enough trouble to keep you occupied for a while.” Louis’ hands found their steeple position. Anna sat silently, watching the two men. Finally, her grandfather continued.

“If you walk away now, he’ll probably let it drop. He’ll be satisfied that he spoiled Anna’s romance. If you keep seeing each other, it could get nasty.”

“I’m not ready to let some piss-ant run me away from a woman I’m trying to get to know.” He was startled by both their laughter. “What?”

Anna went to him, hugging him lightly.

“That’s Grandfather’s favorite name for him.” They both smiled. “Come, let’s have some dessert.” She gathered their cups on the tray, heading back to the kitchen. Both men followed, but Chance paused at the nymph door. His hand ran along the smooth carved rope detailing. Louis watched him.

“Amazing, isn’t it?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“The foyer door was a present for Eddie, her grandmother. The willows were her favorite tree.”

“I noticed that one last time I was here, but only got a glimpse of this one.”

“Ileanna hasn’t let you into the studio yet?”

“No.”

“Let’s have dessert.” He left Chance running his hand over the texture of the satin-like nymph’s dress. Several minutes later, he wandered into the kitchen. Again, they sat at the intimate breakfast table, fresh coffee brewing while she sliced her warm apple walnut cake, drizzling caramel sauce on each portion before she set the plate in front of them.

* * * *

They enjoyed their dessert deliberately changing the subject. It was how he learned the living room half of the apartment had been her grandparents. She had purchased the apartment next to it after her mother passed away, subletting it when she married Scott, choosing to return to it only after the separation. Her grandfather had added that he decided to move a few blocks away. The memories were too much for him since he’d lost his wife. He gave the apartment to Ileanna, and she had them both renovated into one larger space.

“That explains why your door is in such a strange place.”

“I know, and it’s the one thing that still drives me crazy. But, I wasn’t free to change the exterior hallway in any way, only the inside.”

“You should see the pictures of the renovation.”

“Yeah and you should add that no workmen will answer my calls since then!” She laughed at herself. “I have a habit of wanting things just so.”

“In other words, she followed behind them every moment to make sure they got it right.” Louis smiled at Anna.

“I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“You don’t know my Ileana.” The two men each accepted another slice of cake, enjoying it before turning the subject back to Scott. Anna finally spoke what was on her mind.

“Chance, would you have hit Scott at the party?”

He liked the way she cradled a warm cup in her hands. She was sitting back, one leg bent up on the chair, the other crossed under her. And there was so much leg to be bent. Hardening at the thought of having his hands on her bare skin, he cleared his throat, shifting in his seat to accommodate his growth. He silently cursed himself, feeling like a kid, blushing.

He took a moment before answering, Louis watching him watch Ileana. Louis sighed, breaking the quiet of the room.

“Yes and no.”

She laughed at his long-awaited answer. Louis only raised an eyebrow. “All right, start with the no.”

“No, I wouldn’t have hit him at the party unless he came at me first. I just wanted to explain how rude he’d been to you all evening.”

“And lifting him off the floor by his shirt front?”

“Come on, Anna. You heard what he said.”

“Aside from that.”

“Nobody has a right to talk to you or about you like that.” His words rushed out, almost in a sigh. He wanted to stop talking, but his mouth overrode his brain. “And, yes.” His voice heightened. “If I ever have a clean shot and it’s an appropriate location, I will entertain the idea.”

Anna unwound her legs from the chair, leaning slightly across the table. “Thank you very much, Chance Walker, but I can take care of myself.” She stayed still, waiting for her words to penetrate.

“I have no doubt that you can.” Chance leaned over his plate, his voice now another tone hotter. “It still doesn’t change the situation. He has no right.” He kept her eye, waiting for her to blink first.

He knew she could feel his breath across the small expanse of table between them. With his every exhale, her short wispy bangs fluttered against her forehead. *I refuse to give in first*, he decided, holding his look.

“What gives you the right to think...” Her words trailed off, as if she wasn’t ready to know his answer just yet.

Chance noted Louis was quite entertained by them. Yes, that was how he was seeing them, as a couple.

“I have a better idea.” Louis’ words broke the tension, finally giving them both a way out of the standoff. “Chance, you hold him.” He turned to Ileanna. “You, my dear, get to hit him.” He was stunned by the statement, and so was Ileanna apparently when they started to laugh.

First, the two men watched only a small upturn of her top lip, but she bit it back. She covered her mouth with her napkin, masking the smile. After a moment, her shoulder started to move, and she finally dropped the napkin, letting herself have a good laugh, aloud. Chance gave in too. After finally composing herself, she looked to Louis, then to Chance.

Across the table, he reached for her hand. Gently, he laid it over hers. “I don’t think Ileanna needs me to hold him for her.” He winked and she blushed, crimson.

“Louis, thank you for letting me intrude on your evening. Ileanna, the cake was delicious. But, I think it’s time I leave.”

“Chance, what would you say to confronting Scott as a united front, call his bluff before he has time to do much damage?” Louis was leaning on the granite counter, his hands in steeple mode.

“It’s a thought. I left a message at your office earlier this afternoon, asking for an appointment. Do you want to sleep on it and get back to me?”

“Yes, but let’s not let this sit too long. I don’t see a need to wait, especially since you have so much on the line with the expansion.”

Finally, Anna broke in. “Gentlemen, it’s much simpler than that. Chance, you simply have to walk away. Once he knows there’s nothing between us, he’ll back off.” Her arms were folded across her chest, her hands holding her arms. She stood tall and firm. Her face had that masked look, the one he had seen at the party that night.

“I’m not a liar, Ileana.”

“I’m not saying you are. But you can end this by walking away. If we see each other in public, it’s simple to nod and go to neutral corners. You seem like a smart man. There’s no real harm done. We’ve met at a party and had supper together. And coffee, chaperoned. You don’t have to lie at all.”

“It would be a lie to say that there’s nothing between us.” His eyes met hers, and her stance hardened. “You know it, I know it, and after our little outburst, even Louis can see it.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to act on it.”

“I want to.”

“No. Chance...”

Louis broke in, moving beside her. “Anna, we can’t have him extorting or blackmailing everyone that tried to get close to you.”

“Extortion and blackmail, just who the hell is this guy? And for general information, Anna, yes, I will take a shot at him if given half a chance.” Again his voice had risen.

“I really do wish you had the time to get to know me, to decide for yourself if you wanted to pursue a relationship. Now, he’s forced us into a position.”

“Yes, he has,” Louis added. “But, maybe in this case, you two will save a lot of time arguing and admit that you’re both attracted to each other, and start from there.”

Anna had left them in the kitchen. She simply wandered away and they found her in the doorway of the balcony. With the door open, it

cooled the warm apartment. When she turned back, they were both in the living room.

“What’s on your schedule for tomorrow?” Louis asked.

“Nothing that I can’t reschedule.” She seemed resigned. Chance was instantly annoyed. “What do you have in mind?”

“Supper at Mario’s, eight o’clock, it will give us all some time to do some more checking.”

“Chance, you’d be better off walking away. I still prefer that you would.” Chance only laughed as he hugged her. He kissed her lips lightly, and then released her, shaking Louis’ hand on the way out.

He stopped in the foyer, turning back to Louis. “Has he gotten physical with Anna in the past?”

“He’s still alive, isn’t he!”

Chance understood what he meant. Harm Anna and harm will come to you. “Have no fears there, Louis. I will never intentionally hurt her. I’ll meet you at the restaurant.” He left quietly and quickly.

* * * *

“Well, this turned into an interesting evening.”

“Yes, unfortunately it did. A shame too. I really do think I would have enjoyed Chance.” Anna shook her head. “Grandfather, please lock up on your way out. I’m suddenly very tired.” She got half way to her bedroom, adding, “And please tell Chance I’ve made up my mind. Tell him I wish him good luck with the expansion, but I won’t see him anymore. Case closed.” She opened the door to her bedroom, using the wall switch to illuminate the space. “Grandfather, I love you. Enjoy your supper tomorrow with Chance.” She closed the door quietly, effectively shutting off any response he might have had.

* * * *

Louis stood shocked for a moment then burst out laughing. “We’ll see, Ileanna. If you don’t want him, you don’t have to have him, but it will be your choice, not Scott’s.” He did as she asked, walking about, shutting lights and locking the door on his way out. Gus was waiting outside near the door to his limousine.

“Gus, I would appreciate it if you and the rest of the men could keep an eye out for Scott or April Armstrong. Neither is really welcome here just now. Could you pass it along?”

“Of course, Mr. Jennings, but Mr. Walker just left telling me exactly the same thing.”

“I must be getting old, Gus. I don’t move as quickly as I used to.” The two men smiled at each other. Ileanna had grown up in this building. Gus had started working there when she was merely a child.

“We’ll keep our eyes open. What about Mr. Walker? I know I shouldn’t have let him go up last week, but he didn’t seem...”

“For right now, we’ll just get to know him a little better before making any judgments, good or bad.”

“Got it, polite, yet formal.”

“Thank you, Gus.”

“Good night, Mr. Jennings.” He waited until Louis was seated then shut the door, thumping on the hood for the driver to go.

Chapter Six

The restaurant was small, dark, and crowded. Italian love songs played lightly in the background. The bar was full, and it took several minutes for his eyes to adjust to the room. He spotted Louis, making his way through the crowd to his table.

“Good evening, Louis. Is Ileanna running late?” Chance shook hands with Louis, and sat across from him. Waiting until he was settled and had ordered his drink, Louis finally broke the news.

“Anna’s not coming. After you left last night, she told me to tell you good luck with the expansion and she wouldn’t see you anymore. I’m sorry, Chance. Short of a miracle, I don’t see her changing her mind.”

“Well, then we need a miracle.” His mischievous grin made Louis obviously uneasy. His drink arrived, and he lifted it. “To finding the miracle,” he toasted, sipping at the wine.

“How do you plan on that?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” He pulled out several folded sheets of paper from his jacket pocket, handing it to Louis. He read the pages before sitting back.

“Interesting, my guy didn’t get this,” Louis offered, impressed.

“Well, maybe we should team them together and see what they can really do.”

“Have you given any thought to how you’d like to approach this?”

“Yes, you were right. A united front, call his bluff. He’s supposed to be having lunch tomorrow at the restaurant in his office building, one o’clock.”

“I’ll make a reservation for twelve thirty.”

“Will you invite Ileana?”

“Oh, yes. And she’ll come, I promise you, she’ll come.”

“Good.” He enjoyed the clams oreganato while explaining about the cycle of the harvest and the process his vineyard used. He glanced around, suddenly not hungry.

“I get the feeling you’d rather be eating with Anna.”

“That transparent? I don’t like to think she would let anyone get away with this type of emotional blackmail.”

“After lunch tomorrow, you two can decide what you want to do.”

“I hope so, Louis. I’m finding it hard not to ring his scrawny little neck.”

“I’ve been there. In my fantasy his eyes bulge as my fingers tighten around his throat.” Chance laughed out loud, enjoying the man’s sense of humor.

“I’d like to introduce you to my father. You two seem to have a similar outlook on life.”

* * * *

Louis arrived only moments after Ileana was seated. She tried to hide her angst at the sudden must-attend lunch. Walking toward their table, she watched as he stopped to acknowledge several friends and business acquaintances. Reaching her, his hug was warm and reassuring.

“I’m glad you changed your mind. It’s important that you came today.” She waited while he ordered a drink, then he continued. “You look lovely, Ileana. The ivory suit complements you.”

“Thank you, Grandfather. Now, will you tell me why it was so important I meet you here on such short notice?”

“Yes, of course. I do apologize for the timing, but it couldn’t be helped. You see...” He never finished the sentence, for Chance Walker appeared at their table. He shook hands with Louis and lightly brushed her cheek with his lips.

Outrage was her first thought. How dare he show up here, after she had specifically said she wouldn't see him anymore. And on top of it, how dare he look so good in jeans and a sport jacket. She squirmed in her seat, sending daggers to his brain with her look. Short of folding her arms over her chest, both men knew she was annoyed from the menacing look on her face. Louis spoke first.

"Don't get mad at Chance. I set this up." She turned to glare at him, something she hadn't done in years. "Scott is having lunch with some business associates. We felt it would be better to meet him in a public place."

"Yes, I know, a united front." The tone of her words could have made ice turn cold. What was worse was that Chance was enjoying himself at her expense. She carefully folded the napkin that was in her lap and placed it back on the empty plate that sat in front of her. "I told you the other night. This is over before it begins, Chance. And you, Grandfather, I've never been so disappointed." The words stuck in her throat as Scott wove his way through the crowded restaurant, heading straight for them. She glanced to Chance, then to Louis.

"Just play along, Ileanna. Please, trust me on this. There's more at stake here than just a relationship with Chance." Louis squeezed her hand in his, forcing her to meet his eyes. "Come on, relax and watch the show, have some fun. If you're still mad after, I promise not to meddle anymore."

Scott now stood behind the empty chair at their table.

Anna would bet Chance wanted to wipe the smirk off his face, but knew the restaurant was not the place for it. Instead, he would out think him. A small spot of pride welled within her, igniting a long dead spark of heat inside her. In that instant, her pussy went wet with anticipation of how Chance might touch her. Glancing at his profile, she hoped this wasn't a mistake on a different level.

What if he was her one indiscretion so many years ago? How would he react if he realized it was her? She let out her breath and decided since she wasn't one hundred percent sure it was him, and he

hadn't made any overtures toward the incident, she would let it ride. Besides, what if she brought it up and it wasn't him? How would she get out of that tacky situation? Best to just let the memory fade. So this man reminded her of a past liaison. It didn't make it him. She should remember he was a different man and should judge him on his merits and actions. Projecting would get her nowhere. Scott cleared his throat to get her attention, and she instantly found her anger again.

"Well, isn't this a nice surprise. Louis, it's good to see you." Scott shook hands with Louis, and turned. "Anna, my pet, you're looking delicious as always."

"You insult all beloved animals when you call me that." She sat taller in her seat, knowing it would annoy him. Her height had always been his one problem with her. No matter how he tried, he was still just the same height as she. Now that they weren't married, she had gone back to wearing heels. Whenever they did meet socially, she made sure to stand erect and straight, adding to the illusion.

"Mr. Walker, isn't it?" He didn't offer to shake his hand. Chance didn't either.

"Sit a moment, Scott. I'm glad we ran into you." The tone Louis used was all business.

He isn't happy, she thought. He hadn't thought about meeting us here today. It wasn't a place Louis usually lunched, too far from the office. With the three of them together it was a sure thing Scott wouldn't like the outcome.

"I wish I could, but I'm expecting some business associates."

"But I insist," Louis said. He raised his hand and the captain was there. "Please seat Mr. Armstrong's guests and have them order drinks, on me of course. Tell them he'll be along shortly."

The tuxedoed captain nodded then disappeared.

"So what do I owe the honor..."

"No honor for us, Scotty." Louis threw Chance a warning glance across the table. Chance only nodded.

“Scott, something has been brought to my attention. I wasn’t sure how to handle it, but now that you’re here, you can settle it for us, before it goes any further.” Anna noted the calm to Louis’ voice.

Squirming in his seat, Scott glanced at Louis. “What do you want?” His tone got Anna’s attention. No one talked to Louis that way. Feeling her response, Louis again just squeezed her hand.

“It’s come to my attention that you have been looking into my business and social affairs.” Chance’s statement didn’t seem to faze Scott.

“Really, and why would you think that?”

“Because you hired an idiot who left trails to be followed.” Chance’s eyes were narrowing as he said it. “Because, Joe Faraday...”

That got him, Anna acknowledged. Scott knew he was caught. Using the mole’s name finally made him squirm.

Chance continued. “Was quite willing to confess to it all, for a small fee, of course.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Anybody could have used my name. Actually, I think it’s quite interesting that you would fall for an old line like that. How much did you pay him, Walker?”

“Enough.” Louis said, just short of raising his voice. “We’ve both talked with Faraday, and we know you hired him. That’s neither here nor there.”

“I’d like to know why?” asked Anna. All three of them were surprised at her interruption. She held Scott’s gaze until he looked away, glancing toward Chance.

“I just wanted to make sure you weren’t about to be taken by some con man. I really did have your best interest at heart, pet.”

Her stomach rolled when he used the name again. “I’m quite capable of taking care of myself, Scott.”

“I’m sure you are, but what about him? He shows up out of nowhere. Nobody knows anything about him. As family, I felt it my obligation to make sure he...”

“Family my ass.” She said it with her perfect, masked face, the public one. Chance was biting his inner lip to keep from laughing, Anna saw at a peripheral glance. Anyone around them would have thought she had just told him something special. “You were never family, not from the day we came home from our honeymoon.”

Chance looked to Louis, who just slowly shook his head not to ask. Taking a deep breath, Louis interrupted. “Scott, that’s neither here nor there anymore. You’re happily married to April now, and you know we all wish you the best.”

“I have guests waiting. If the family reunion is over,” He started to rise from his seat, but Louis gave him a look. Slowly, Scott sat back down.

“I would hate to think that April will be hurt. You know how she adores you. Why, on more than one occasion, I myself have heard her joke that ‘You’re the love of her life, and God help anyone who came between you two,’ or words to that effect.”

“April and I have a solid marriage.”

“Then why this?” Slowly for effect, Louis pulled pages from his inner suit jacket pocket. First, he gave them to Ileanna. She glanced at it, but realized what she was seeing and gave them her full attention. One by one, she turned the pages. Louis and Chance both watched her carefully.

“I know this is silly, but I somehow feel bad for her.” She handed the pages back to Louis, who in turn handed them to Scott.

He first lost all color, then the red started at his neck, slowly gaining until his entire face looked like he was about to explode. The copies of the photographs were grainy, but they were clear enough to see Scott and his girlfriend in several different locations, each proving that they were more than just friends or business associates. He turned around, checking who was around them, then tucked the pages into his jacket pocket.

“Someone is playing a joke on you both. This is nonsense.”

“Not according to the young lady.”

Scott looked stricken. His eyes narrowed, first to Anna, then Louis and finally settling on Chance.

“What have you done?” His voice was loud and cold.

“He’s done nothing.” Louis interceded. “Actually, she and I had a long talk this morning. You’ll find she’s decided to go home to Alabama, spend some time with her family.”

“How dare you pay her off.”

“Never gave her a dime. I just told her the truth. You were the one who lied. An arranged marriage!” Louis laughed out loud. Turning to Ileana, he continued, “It’s a shame really. She seemed like a nice girl. All she wanted was to get married and start a family.” Scott dug his fingernails into the white linen tablecloth. “As far as the three of us are concerned, we know nothing. And it stays that way as long as you leave Anna alone and there’s no trouble with Chance’s business.”

“How dare you? April won’t believe for a moment that I would take up with a chorus girl. I’m too well bred for that.”

“Yes, one might have thought so. And nobody here mentioned she was a dancer. The real problem is more of a moral dilemma for me,” Louis said. “I’m still quite good friends with April’s father, golf, poker and all that. I have to do some deep thinking. If the tables were reversed, I’d expect my friend to let me know if a son-in-law was cheating on my daughter.”

“Not to mention the discrepancies in the accounts,” Chance added.

Scott swung around, glaring at Chance. “It’s amazing that you could make so much money and still be overextended, beyond what your trust fund will cover.” It was more a statement of fact than a rude comment.

“Don’t think you won this one. No matter how you try, every time you touch her, you’ll know I had her first. That will never change. I don’t think a man like you can forget that, no matter how big her bank account is.” His words came out in a hiss. Anna relived all the moments he invoked anger within her and shuddered at the idea she had been married to him.

“Anna, I know this isn’t the place, but surely...”

“He’s not worth the bruised hand, Chance.” It was the first time she smiled in days, and it felt good. “Besides, I have plans for those hands later.” He took her hand, squeezed it, and kept it in his. She decided it felt right.

“Scott, watch your step. I’ll be keeping an eye on you. What you do to April is your own business. But, if you try anything with Chance or Ileanna I won’t be held responsible.”

“Threats from an old man. Who cares? You’re a dinosaur, Louis. Gone. Extinct. Only you’re too stupid to know you’re already dead.”

Slowly, Anna stood. She pulled her hand from Chance’s and walked behind his chair, pausing to touch his shoulder. Louis watched her, not sure if he should intercede, but she shook her head, telling him not to interrupt. When she rounded the table, she whispered something to Scott. It made him mad and he stood, his chair scraping the floor. The noise brought the attention of the diners around them.

With a large smile, almost in slow motion, Ileanna landed one square punch, straight to Scott’s jaw. Catching him off guard, he stumbled back, fell over his chair, and landed on his back, holding his chin.

Anna simply turned and walked back to her seat. She smiled at the diners around her who started to applaud. The clapping brought the attention of the other diners, who now watched Scott climb up from the floor.

Chance started laughing along with Louis and several of the diners in their area. There were murmurs all through the restaurant, some laughing. Scott was beet red holding his jaw as he finally regained his composure.

“I suppose you had that one coming, Anna. But I warn you, this isn’t over.” He straightened his jacket and turned to storm away, knocking into a waiter carrying a pitcher of water. While he managed to hold on to the pitcher, the water splashed over the sides, dousing the front of Scott. He stormed from the restaurant, looking back only

when he reached the door. All eyes in the room were watching him leave.

Anna threw her arms around Chance Walker's neck, smiling with a renewed relief. Whatever happened between her and Chance, they would start from an equal footing without outside influences between them.

The fuss around them settled down and Anna was surprised when the captain came to her with a cloth napkin filled with chipped ice. He slowly applied it to her knuckles, wrapping it around and tying it in the palm of her hand to secure it. "Lunch is compliments of the restaurant, Ms. Jennings." He smiled and left.

Ileanna couldn't help but smile when she looked to Louis.

"He's had that coming for years, my dear. I'm very happy for you."

"So am I, but I wish it could have been me." Chance added, "And I was right. I didn't need to hold him for you." They all had a good laugh, toasting each other with the bottle of champagne that had been brought to them, compliments of the house.

"One question, Anna? What did you whisper to him?" She felt heat flush her cheeks and rearranged the napkin in her lap. Chance used his hand to hold the ice against her knuckles, leaning in to hear her answer.

Anna debated whether to tell or not, then figured what the hell. "Grandfather, I simply said that..."

"Go on, dear, you won't embarrass me."

"I told him his dick was so small that technically I was still a virgin."

The roar of Louis Jennings' laughter bellowed around the elegant restaurant. Chance seemed stunned for a second then joined in. So did the man sitting directly behind Ileanna. It was his laugh that got her attention. Turning slowly, she met his eyes and realized who it was.

"Join us, old friend," Louis told him. The elder man rose and took the seat Scott had vacated. "Chance Walker, this is Ben, Benjamin

Holt, April's father." The men shook hands, and Anna reached across the table. He took her hand and smiled.

"I'm so proud of you, my dear. I don't know what she sees in him, but after today, whatever it is, she will see with clear eyes." Their eyes met and held no words needed. They both knew the levels of debauchery Scott was capable of.

"Let's order, suddenly I have an appetite," Ileanna said. The rest of lunch was a joy. She enjoyed the company, even when her meal arrived in pre-cut bite-size pieces.

The chef came to the table to inquire about the marinated London broil. "I heard all about it, my dear. How I wish I had witnessed it with my own eyes," he told her. The chocolate soufflé was delicious. By the time they left, Chance had his arm around Anna's shoulders, holding her close. Anna was comfortable with his move, letting herself drift back against the wall of his body as the elevator jolted.

"Ileanna, I have to go to Long Island for a few days. Come with me?" Louis and Ben both turned to watch them.

"I have so much work to do, Chance. I couldn't."

"Not with this hand, not for a few days at least." Chance smiled.

She laughed when she realized he was right.

"Louis, do you have a problem with Anna coming to the winery with me for the weekend. There's lots of room. Why not come with us? Dad and Charlotte have just returned from vacation. It would give us a chance to spend some time together, get to know each other."

"Thank you, but I couldn't possibly get away. He's right about you not getting any work done for a few days, Ileanna. Why not go and relax, enjoy the sun?"

"I don't know what to say?"

"Yes, is all you have to say," Chance whispered. "Besides, they'll be plenty of chaperones and you mentioned you wanted to meet Lottie."

“Chaperones?” Anna wasn’t sure if that was bad or good. At his invitation, she instantly pictured them lying naked with their limbs intertwined before a fire.

“Unfortunately, yes.” All four of them laughed at his disappointed look.

“All right, yes. I’d love to get out of the city for a few days. When do you want to leave?”

“How soon can you get packed?” The door opened to the lobby, letting them all out into the spacious area. Ben chose to say his good-byes then. Louis hugged Anna, reinforced how proud he was of her, and gave Chance one last look. “Nothing’s going to hurt her, Louis, I promise.”

“See that you keep that promise. Call me when you get back next week. Let me know if he kept it.”

Anna watched Louis walk away from them, finally feeling a bit of peace in her heart. From now on, it’s up to us. Whatever would happen, it would be their decision.

Chapter Seven

They left the following morning. Surprisingly, Anna fell asleep while Chance was driving. The hum of the tires on the road had lulled her into a dreamlike state as soon as they entered the tunnel. An hour later she woke, realizing they had crossed over the Suffolk county line.

"I'm sorry. I don't know what got into me. I never sleep in the car."

"You needed the rest." Chance glanced at her, but kept his eyes on the road. "We're about an hour from the winery. Would you like to stop anywhere?"

"Coffee, please. I feel like I've been asleep for days." Her smile was genuine.

"Would you like to take the scenic route or stay on the expressway?" Chance offered, giving her the option to decide.

"Your choice." She stretched her arms upward as far as the vehicle would allow.

"The parkway and expressway cross over just ahead. Think about it, either way, we can stop for coffee and lunch."

"I don't need lunch, Chance, just a cup of coffee for the drive."

"Find us something on the radio besides news, please."

Anna strained forward against her seat belt, pushing in the pre-set buttons on the stereo. She found a classic rock station that seemed to fit their moods and watched as he decided to take the parkway. A short time later, it ended, taking them through the South Shore of Long Island. After several traffic lights, he pulled into a gas station convenience store. They both got out, Anna watching Chance stretch

to his full height. The soft floral-print dress she wore rustled around her legs with the warm breeze. With cardboard cups of coffee in their holders in the console between their seats, he headed back onto the main road.

“Have you been out this way before?”

“Not since last summer. I spent a few weeks with friends in the Hamptons. It was fun, but crowded.” She smiled as she sipped from her cup.

“Well, the North Fork isn’t as populated, but it can still get crazy. We have tasting and tours on the weekends in season.”

Chance spent the rest of the ride telling her about his summers from college when he first went to work in a winery in Napa. It was where he learned to respect the vine and the process. Before she knew it, they had driven across the island, through the populated area, passing fewer and fewer shops and stores. The road narrowed and the traffic lights lessened. Soon, with the windows open and the breeze blowing through her hair, Chance made several turns and pulled up in front of a large old white clapboard home. Its wide porch wrapped around the house, affording several different seating areas, all with white wicker furniture.

“It’s beautiful, Chance. Is this Charlotte’s home?”

“Yes, well, it used to be. Now she calls the ranch home.”

Distracted by the lines of the house, she waited until he got her door, helping her out onto the gravel driveway. He grabbed her suitcase and his computer case before leading her up the front stairs.

The door magically opened for them, revealing a rotund woman Anna figured to be in her fifties. Her gray hair was cut short around her chin and teased high on her head. She had a brilliant smile and hugged Chance before he could put down his cases.

“So, finally, we get to meet.” She turned to Anna, pulling her into a bear hug. “I’m Sally, the housekeeper here, and you must be Ileana. Welcome.”

“Thank you. It’s nice to be here.”

“Come inside, I’ve lunch waiting for you.” She ushered Anna inside to the cool foyer, pausing to wink at Chance, a move Anna didn’t miss. “I’ll show you your room. You can wash up then we can all have a bite to eat and get to know each other.”

Anna followed her up the stairs and was shown into a beautiful white and pink guest room. The large queen-size bed was covered in a pink floral that matched the white and pink striped paper. Sally opened a closet door, then a second, revealing a small but functional bath.

“It’s small, but serviceable. Chance is across the hall, Lottie next to him. The Mr. and Mrs. are on the other side of the staircase, in case you need anything when I’m not around.”

“The room is lovely. Thank you for the flowers.” Anna didn’t resist pausing to smell the small pink rosebuds that were just beginning to open.

“My pleasure, dear. Now, wash up and come downstairs. We don’t stand on ceremony around here, so make yourself comfortable.”

Chance appeared in the doorway, glanced around the room with a practiced eye, and came in to put Anna’s cases on the bench at the foot of the bed. “Thank you, Sally.”

“Lunch, fifteen minutes.” She again winked openly at Chance, and then left them alone.

“The room is beautiful. Do I have you to thank for the flowers?”

“I’m glad you like them. Wash up and I’ll come back for you in a few minutes.” He kissed her cheek lightly, leaving her room. With the door ajar, she watched him stride to his room, directly across from hers. She set about unpacking, and then freshened her hair and makeup, favoring her bruised hand. She was just about to head out when he knocked on the door.

“Find everything?”

“Yes.”

“Good, I’m hungry. What about you?” She nodded, walking across the white carpet, taking his outstretched hand. He took it lightly, his thumb gently stroking her bruises.

Downstairs, he paused to show her the front living room on one side of the staircase, a baby grand piano tucked into the bay window area, and the formal dining room on the other. Through the dining room, they entered a large, eat-in kitchen. Sally was at the counter, her hands immersed in a large stainless steel bowl of dough.

“You must really rate,” Chance whispered, tightening his grip on her hand. “The elders are already on the patio. Join them. I’ll bring lunch in a few minutes.”

Dismissed, Chance smiled, then ushered Anna out onto the brick patio. The pool was oval shaped and there were four different seating areas around it. To their right, an older couple sat at a table under a green umbrella. Anna’s breath caught in her throat. Sitting next to a beautiful black-haired woman was Chance, or an older version of him, slightly graying at the temples. There would be no denying the relationship between the men.

“Ah, you’ve arrived. Welcome, Ileanna. I’m King Walker.” Standing to his full height, she noted he was as tall as Chance. She went to shake his hand, but again, was greeted with a hug. “This is my lovely wife, Charlotte.”

Anna smiled and received a warm hug from her also, though she was surprised at how small and petite the woman was. Her black hair and dark eyes faded into a flawless complexion and into a woman who stood no more than five foot four. She noted the warm smile she had for Chance as they hugged before he pulled out a chair for Anna. Seated around the table, Sally hurried out with a tray of sandwiches. She made several trips, finally returning with a pitcher of iced tea. After serving themselves, they settled into a quiet conversation.

“The grounds are lovely. Who’s the gardener in this group?” Anna asked.

“Charlotte has cultivated the rose gardens around the house, and I’m proud to add that our Lottie seems to have inherited her green thumb.”

“They’re beautiful, and so early in the season.”

After that, Ileanna answered many questions, volleying as many back, finding out bits of information about Chance and Lottie.

“He’ll have to bring you to the ranch next month when he comes down,” King added. “Chance, shall we leave the ladies to rest? I want to see the new grafts you were experimenting with.”

Charlotte handed Anna a large-brimmed straw hat, and then tucked her arm around hers. They walked through the garden, admiring the early blooms.

“We’re so happy Chance has brought you to meet us. We were beginning to think that he was going to be the perpetual bachelor.”

Anna stopped short, tugging Charlotte to a halt. She gathered her thoughts, and then carefully began. “Charlotte, I’m not sure what Chance has told you, but we’ve only known each other a short time. I wouldn’t want anyone to get the wrong idea.”

“That’s exactly what he told us, dear. I suppose we’re sort of a litmus test. If you can handle his family, you can handle anything that life throws your way.” Said with humor, Anna wondered what was behind it. “It’s just that he hasn’t seemed interested in anyone in a long time. We’re happy that he’s seeing someone nice.”

“Thank you.”

“Now I’ve done it, I’ve got your mind racing in all directions.” Charlotte’s smile gave her away. “We’re a strange lot, but we all love and respect each other. We just want Chance to be happy. He’s spent so much of his time getting the winery going and keeping the ranch going. I’m afraid King and I seem to be on a perpetual honeymoon, leaving a lot of the work to Chance.”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t want it any other way.”

“Yes, you’re right of course.” They had walked what seemed to be acres of a crushed stone path before turning back. Anna could hear the

waves hitting the surf below them, but she couldn't see it. "The sound is just on the other side of the hedges. There is a path down to the water on the other side of the garden. Maybe later you'd like to walk down."

"Yes. I think I might. Is there anything that I can help with while I'm here? Chance told me to come for the rest, but I'm much better off being busy."

"Tomorrow is the first tour of the season. Why not join in and get the feel for the place. Tonight, we'll relax and catch up. King and I just returned from California and Chance has been snapping all week to find out what we saw."

"When will I get to meet Lottie?" They had turned a corner of the path, the back of the house now in view.

"At supper, she's visiting friends this afternoon." Charlotte stopped walking, nodding to a cement bench to the side. They took a seat in the shade, the change in temperature surprising Anna.

"Has Chance told you about me and King?"

Anna looked, thinking back. "He told me you were married once before and he was working for you when his father came for a visit. Is that right?"

"Yes. Chance came to us just after he finished law school. He hated the idea of practicing law, wanted to have his hands in the earth. He had good references from Napa, and we needed the help. My first husband had bought the property, but it was left to seed. Nobody had cared for the vines for years. It was his dream to bring them back, establish a label."

"He told me you lost him in an accident."

"Yes. But Chance being Chance, he probably didn't tell you he was driving while impaired and caused his own death."

"No, he didn't. I'm sorry."

"Vito and I had an arranged marriage. Even though I was born here, my family in the old country knew Vito's family. When I was twenty-six and still not married, they arranged our marriage."

“I can’t imagine something like that in this day and age.”

“I couldn’t either, but then I met Vito and he seemed so lonely. I hadn’t had much luck when it came to men, so to keep the family happy we married. With several stipulations, the main one being that we kept separate bedrooms. Vito had diabetes and didn’t take care of himself. He was happy for a companion that didn’t expect favors.”

“But, Charlotte, you’re such a beautiful woman. I can’t imagine you wanting a life like that.”

“At the time I was suffering from a broken heart, and it seemed like a good idea.”

“Were you ever happy with him...never mind, I have no right to ask. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s all right, Anna. I brought up the subject and for a good reason. You see, King and I fell in love the first time he came to visit Chance. At the time we were just planting the first of the new vines, hoping they would take. It was an overpowering attraction for us. It’s the kind of attraction that I see when I look at you and Chance together.” Anna blushed, feeling the color creep up her cheeks.

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything. Just know that we just want Chance to be happy. You seem to make him happy. We’re very pleased you’ve come to visit us.”

“I get the feeling there’s more.”

“No, I just wanted you to understand King and I still understand what it’s like to love someone.” They sat in silence for a long time, listening to the bees in the garden, Anna wondering what Chance had told his family about her.

Finally, Charlotte sighed. “I suppose they’ll wonder where we took off to. And I know Chance will want to take you on a private tour of the yard. Shall we?” Standing, Charlotte reached for Anna’s hand, placing it on her arm. “It’s nice to have another woman to talk to.”

“What about Sally?”

“Sally is wonderful, but somewhat judgmental.” Charlotte lifted an eyebrow. “I’d wait to sneak into Chance’s room until she’s gone to bed if I were you.”

“I have no intentions of...” Anna saw the glint in Charlotte’s eyes and started to laugh.

“We’ll get along fine, Anna. Just be yourself when you’re with us.” Chance met them at the edge of the pool, a not-quite-worried look on his face. “You two have a nice walk?”

“Yes, the gardens are lovely. Charlotte must be a miracle worker.”

“I’ll leave you two alone for a while. Chance, where is King?”

“He said he was heading up to your room for a rest. He mentioned something about jet lag.” Chance raised his eyebrow at her. Charlotte brushed a light kiss on his cheek then started to walk away.

“We’ll see you both at seven for supper. I’m going to take a rest with King.” Chance let out a laugh. Charlotte just waved as she all but skipped into the house.

“She’s wonderful, you know.”

“Yes, I was lucky there. You know all the stories about wicked stepmothers.” He stopped talking, pulled the hat from her head, and kissed her properly on the lips. Warm and light at first, then his arms found their way around her waist, pulling her close. He deepened the kiss as she parted her lips to him. He teased at first, finally giving in to the temptation, exploring her with his lips and teeth, his tongue driving her crazy as it slid along hers, battling for her to surrender.

Anna felt him grow against her thigh. He had pulled her so tight against him it was hard to breathe. She didn’t pull back. She wanted him to take her breath away, to lose herself in him as she had never been able to before. When she felt him pull back, it took them both a minute before they moved. A wolf whistle came from the direction of the pool, intruding on their moment. Chance had his back to the house, blocking anyone’s view of Anna. Slowly, he plopped the hat back on her head and took her hand, leading her back toward the pool. Leaning against the side of the pool was a miniature female version of

Chance treading water. Her black hair was wet and slicked back. She was long and lean, Anna saw.

“You must be Ileanna. I’m Lottie.”

“Nice to meet you, Lottie. Please call me Anna.” Without thinking, Anna slipped off her sandals and went to sit on the side of the pool, her feet dangling in the cool water.

“So, you’re the one who’s got big brother all knotted up inside.” The young woman knew she was baiting him, but Chance kept his cool.

“Yes, Anna. Did you know that at fifteen Lottie knows all about the world and love is her favorite topic?” He teased.

“Do you swim, Anna?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Why not change and come in. The water’s warm and we have loads of time before supper.” Anna looked to Chance. He smiled and shook his head.

“Swim if you’d like. I have a few hours’ work to do before the tour tomorrow.”

“Sounds like a good idea to me. I’ll be back shortly, Lottie.” Anna pulled her feet from the water, using a towel Chance handed her to dry them. She didn’t put her sandals back on. Instead she carried them.

Ten minutes later, Anna stood at the edge of the diving board, her light blue mallet suit hugging her body. With a deep breath, she rose up and dove into the water, leaving only a small back splash of water in her wake. She surfaced at the other end, drawing in a deep breath. Lottie started to applaud. “That was great. Do you think you could show me?”

For the rest of the afternoon, Anna and Lottie took turns diving, racing the length of the pool, and finally playing volleyball over a rope net. Chance came back outside to join them with the news it was long past five.

“You two still in there. I’d figured you’d be raisins by now.”

“Come in for a while, Chance. The water’s wonderful.” Anna gave him one of her best smiles.

“Maybe later.”

Anna swam to the edge where he stood. “Is he always such a pain, Lottie?”

“Sometimes.” Anna used her index finger to make him bend down, expecting to receive a kiss. When she had his hand, she looked him right in the eye. “Chance, do you have your wallet on you?”

“No, why, do you need a loan?” Before he finished the sentence, his eyes grew wide, and he knew he had sealed his fate. She tugged on his arm, pulling him off balance and directly into the water with her and Lottie. He stayed at the bottom for a long time, obviously debating what to do. When he finally surfaced, the two women had taken to opposite ends of the pool, both breathing hard from laughing while racing away.

“Splitting up?” he teased.

“You can only get one of us at a time this way.” Anna dove under the water when he headed in her direction, managing to clear his reach by inches. She and Lottie watched from the other end of the pool as Chance pulled himself up out of the water, tugging the wet shirt over his head. His shoes were tossed aside, and he went to the diving board.

“Uh oh,” Lottie said. “We’re in for it now.”

Chance barreled off the board, creating a tidal wave of water that threw both the women off balance, giving him enough time to reach them both. With a hand on the top of each of their heads, he tried to hold them under the water, but didn’t quite manage it. Finally, he gave up, floating away from them, letting them catch their breath.

“Be careful, Anna. He’ll bide his time then get back at you.”

“She’s right, you know. When you least expect it.” A sly smile crossed his lips, and Anna instantly warmed, wanting to kiss him, knowing she couldn’t with Lottie watching.

Sally wandered out to the poolside, several thick towels in her hands. Surveying the situation, she let out a laugh. "That's the last time I send you out to get them out of the pool."

"It was great, Sally. You should have seen Anna. She baited him and pulled him in before he knew what was happening." Her giggles led Anna to believe she had opened a door she might regret.

"Well, that's how it's going to be." She looked to Chance still floating on his back, his khaki shorts billowing on top of the water.

"Welcome to the family, Anna. I might add that you should probably watch your back until he gets his revenge." Laughing, she dropped the stack of towels on a chair, and turned back to them. "Supper's in an hour."

Lottie pulled herself up on the side of the pool, gracefully rolling over onto the brick apron. She lay in the last rays of the dying sun, drying. Anna swam to Chance, treading water in the deep end.

"Go ahead, do your worst. I deserve it."

Chance only smiled. "That's not how it works. I'll wait until you least expect it."

"I see. Well, I guess I'd better go and shower. See you at supper." She kissed him lightly then swam to the ladder. Chance watched her exit the pool, then turned onto his belly and started to swim laps.

"You coming, Chance?" Lottie called.

"In a little while." He waved back, but kept swimming.

Chapter Eight

Anna was sitting on a chaise lounge when Chance joined her just before supper. Coming downstairs, she had thought it would be Lottie at the piano, but instead she stood in the doorway, listening to Chance play Mozart. For a long time she didn't move, immersed in the sound he was creating. She slipped away, unnoticed. She had changed into tan linen pants with a matching floral top. Sleeveless, the hint of sunburn on her bare shoulder and arms was apparent.

"Too much sun, today?"

She startled from the book she was pretending to read, not having heard him come out. "I'll be tan by morning. That's one good thing about being a brunette."

"I can think of several others." He kissed her lightly before walking to the bar area by the back door. "What will you have to drink?"

"Whatever you're having." She marked her place in the book and went to him. "I didn't know you played?" Watching as he expertly opened the bottle of wine, she waited for him to pour the light amber liquid into glasses before taking the bottle from him, examining the label. "Who designed it?" She was drawn to the worn-looking fence surrounding the full and vibrant vines laden with fruit bowing the limbs.

"We all had a hand in it." He passed her a glass, motioning her to a table by the pool. She paused for a moment, wondered if he'd toss her in, and decided he'd bide his time. She smiled back. "Not before supper when I'm so hungry."

“Keep me on edge a little longer?” Turning in his chair, he reached to stroke her chin.

“Always just a little off tilt, I would think.” They never lost eye contact, his face coming closer, his hand holding her face lightly, until his lips reached hers. Only then did she close hers. When he pulled back, her hand went to his arm, holding him a little longer.

Her invitation accepted, he kissed her again, this time with deeper intentions, his hand to her shoulder, pulling her closer. Someone cleared their throat in the background. It didn’t stop Chance, and Anna didn’t pull away.

“Wow, what a kiss.” Lottie’s delighted voice broke the spell.

Anna released her hold on his arm, Chance reluctantly pulling away. Though the light sunburn, she wondered if he saw her cheeks flush. Realizing how they had been kissing and where embarrassed her. She was more astonished that she wanted more. Anna sipped wine, wanting to change the subject. Lottie joined them at the table, a glass half full in her hand.

“I was just asking Chance who designed the label?” Anna quickly said. Her lips still tingled from Chance’s kiss. She wanted more, then and now, not supper with his family. She wanted him alone, under the stars.

“I’m sorry, what? I was thinking about the tour tomorrow,” he said.

“I’ll just bet you were,” Lottie added, her sly grin unconcealed. Just when Anna started to get uncomfortable, they were joined by King and Charlotte. They look like newlyweds, she thought. Charlotte had the glow of a woman sated. King that dreamy-eyed gaze for his wife. Sally was on the patio shortly after, bringing trays of food to the table. Tonight, she dined with them, not standing on ceremony. Her chicken and rice was delicious. After, they sampled a new vintage with cheese and fruit.

Anna was caught up in the conversations around her. At one point she couldn’t keep up with them, choosing to sit back and watch.

Charlotte and King touched often, a pat of the hand, a squeeze of a shoulder, a small kiss on the cheek. Lottie was bubbling over about a new boy at school. One she thought might like to visit them this summer. Her announcement only got one raised eyebrow and that was from Sally.

“Anna, Chance told us you are an artist, but hurt your hand. From the bruising, I can see you’ve done just that. How did it happen?” There was no malice in King’s tone, just curiosity.

She was glad it was dark. Only candles on the table lit the area. She blushed, twisting her napkin in her lap. Slowly, she looked to each face at the table, biting back a smile. Finally, when resigned to telling them, Sally spoke up.

“Doesn’t anyone read a newspaper anymore? She landed a good one on her ex-husband at lunch yesterday. Chance was there. He can tell you all about it.” Sally sat back, waiting to see how Anna reacted. It didn’t take long. Chance was about to bite at Sally when Anna touched his arm.

“It’s all right, Chance. My ex-husband insulted my grandfather. I’m afraid I lost my self-control for a moment.” Unconsciously, she rubbed at her purple and yellow knuckles.

“Chance, you let this happen? You were there?” Charlotte asked.

“Yes, on orders to behave, I might add. My orders,” Anna answered. “Besides, I’ve wanted to do that for years.” There was a silence that was defining for a moment, and then King burst out laughing.

“She’s a keeper, Chance. But I’d watch my back if I were you.”

Having defused the situation, Anna smiled at King. Lottie started to ask a lot of questions, until Chance finally cut her off.

“He’s the reason for the extra security. Apparently, he feels I’m treading on his territory.”

“But the blurb said he was remarried?” Sally offered.

“He is.” Both Chance and Anna said at the same time. Chance refilled their glasses, giving them the condensed version, leaving out Anna’s whispered comment.

“And you really slugged him, in the middle of the restaurant?”

“I’m not proud of it. I shouldn’t have let him goad me into it. But, he was very rude to Grandfather.”

“Watching over her own,” Charlotte whispered. She stood, helping Sally to clear. Anna stood instinctively, helping too.

* * * *

With the four women in the kitchen, King pulled out a cigar and offered one to Chance. They sat in the cooling night air, the red glow of the cigars giving away their location.

“I like her, Chance, but what about this ex?”

“I like her too, King. I’m not sure about him. He seems to think he has a hold over her, likes to make trouble. Louis, Anna’s grandfather, and I presented him with some photographic evidence of his current liaisons, and he wasn’t happy.”

“How involved are you two? I know I have no right to ask, but...” King watched his son think for a moment and puff on the cigar.

“Remember how you felt when you first met Charlotte?” King only nodded. “This is worse. For the first time, I think this is really about love, not just lust.”

“You would be the one to know about lust, but are you sure?”

“No. Yes. I’m not sure what she’s thinking. That’s why I wanted her to come this weekend.”

“Reinforcements?”

“Something like that. I haven’t...we haven’t...”

“Coffee’s ready,” Lottie announced, carrying a tray to the table.

“And you wouldn’t this weekend,” King added.

“Exactly, I wanted to spend time with her, but on my home base.”

“See how she fits?” King gave him a knowing smile.

“But I guess I already knew. Now keeping away from her is my biggest problem.” Chance said it with a resigned laugh. Both men headed back to the main table, joining the women for coffee.

Just as he got there, Anna was about to take the last bite of her éclair. She looked at him, then at the éclair, then to him. Quietly, she offered it. He paused only for a moment, devouring it from her fingers.

“You gave me the best bite,” he said in a low whisper. “Wait until I give you mine.” He watched her face go rigid and then smile with realization.

It was late when Lottie went inside. King and Charlotte stayed outside ending their meal with a brandy. Chance had returned with the bottle and two sweaters, handing one to Charlotte, pausing to drape the second one around Anna’s shoulders. “Thanks.” She smiled up from her position on the chaise lounge next to Charlotte. Accepting the brandy, she couldn’t hide the deep yawn. “Excuse me. I haven’t had this much wine...ever.”

“You’ll get used to it. That’s why we let Lottie have a little with the evening meal. She can’t operate a winery someday if she can’t hold her liquor.”

“King! Stop that,” Charlotte said. “We’re supposed to be teaching her the subtle differences in blending the tastes.”

“Yes, that too.” He winked at his wife as he took her hand. “Shall we?”

“Of course, it’s getting late.”

As they prepared to retire for the night, King invited Anna to take the tour in the morning. “It will give you an overview of what we do here.”

“I’d love that. What time?”

Half an hour later, she and Chance were alone on the patio. He sat in the lounge next to her, his hand reaching over to hold hers lightly.

“How’s the hand feel?”

“Sore, but well worth it.” She laughed a little, leaving her lounge, fitting herself next to Chance on the one he laid on. His arm went around her shoulders, pulling her closer. It was a tight fit, but that made it better. She lazily ran circles on his chest with her fingers, her feather touch starting to drive him mad. He shifted, and then had to shift her around him.

“Chance, am I making you uncomfortable?” In the darkness she could be bold.

“Yes.” She didn’t try to get up. Instead, she continued her assault on his chest, finding his flat nipple with the tip of her finger. Through the layer of cloth, she still felt it harden under her touch. “Chance? Charlotte told me earlier that I had to wait until Sally was asleep before sneaking into your room tonight.” It was apparent from her lazy voice that she was almost half asleep.

“Did she now? And do you plan on surprising me later?”

“I hadn’t, but now...”

“Now it’s time to take you upstairs and pour you into bed.”

“Who’s bed?”

Chance held her close, his arms wrapped around her, keeping her in place. After a long time, he finally answered.

“Your bed, Ileana.” He shifted her again, this time to the side of the lounge, standing before he reached down to take her hand. “God help me, Anna, but I’m going to put you in your bed.”

“Don’t you want me, Chance?” His hand came to her cheek, forcing her to look directly at him.

“Anna, when we’re together, I want it for the right reasons, not too much wine.” With that, he picked her up and tossed her over his shoulder, carrying her to the edge of the pool. He stood transfixed for a moment, watching their reflection in the water, and then backed away.

“Couldn’t do it, could you?” she taunted.

“Too easy. I’ll wait for a better time.” He put her down, keeping his arm around her shoulders, walking her into the house. Upstairs at

her door, he paused, kissed her lightly, and all but shoved her inside. “Sleep well, Anna. I’ll be up early tomorrow. Sleep in. The tour starts at eleven. I’ll see you there.”

“Chance, good night.”

“Good night, Ileanna.” He paused then turned away from her.

In the darkness of his own room, Chance took a moment to gather his composure. A woman like Anna was hell on a man like Chance. Restraint had never been one of his best subjects. She was straining all his limits.

Chapter Nine

Anna blended into the tour group, hanging toward the back. She had woken early, showered, and downed several aspirin. Sally had coffee brewing when she made her way downstairs. Accepting a steamy cup of the caffeinated liquid, she enjoyed the stories offered by Sally about Chance and Lottie since she had joined the family.

“That was just before Lottie was born, and I’ve been with them ever since.”

“They’re very lucky to have you, Sally. Anyone who makes coffee this good is always welcome in my family too.” Beaming back a smile, she got a hug to go with it. Shortly after, the rest of the family joined them, Lottie being the last straggler to the breakfast table. Chance was absent as he had mentioned the night before.

It wasn’t what she had expected. The tasting room, as it was called, led into a cavernous set of tunnels, all stacked with barrels leading into cellars holding mass quantities of bottled wine, waiting for their time. She was surprised that Charlotte led the tour. She had expected Chance to do it. He was nowhere to be seen.

The tour ended back at the tasting room. It was paneled in dark oak, housing a bar that ran the length of one wall. Anna chose to forgo the tasting after the previous night. Her head had just cleared. Skirting the back of the group, she exited, and turned right into King’s large chest.

“I didn’t know there was a wall here,” she teased.

He looked at her for a long moment, as if deciding something, she thought.

“Why not take a walk in the vineyard? It’s a beautiful afternoon.”

“Thank you. I was hoping to be able to.”

“Take a hat from the house. The sun is heavy this time of day. We don’t need you to get burned.”

“I will.” She hesitated, and then started to walk away. King’s voice stopped her dead in her tracks.

“Take the path to the right. Chance is checking out some new vines in that area. He can answer any questions you might have.” With a glint in his eye, he winked. Anna was becoming fond of King Walker. He had spirit, and he wasn’t afraid to show his affection for his wife and children. A rare man, indeed.

“Said the spider to the fly...” she whispered, but he heard her, laughing aloud.

“Something like that. Sally will have a picnic lunch ready for you.”

“I feel like a sacrificial...” She was about to say virgin, but that wasn’t accurate.

“Have a nice lunch, Anna. We’ll see you both at supper.” He turned, heading inside, leaving her with her thoughts until she reached the house. True to his word, Sally was just filling a wicker basket with food.

“Ah, here you are, right on schedule.”

“I didn’t know I had one,” Anna answered with a smile.

“Yes, well. Chance thought you might like to join him.”

“Is he always right, Sally?” She watched as the woman mulled over her words, choosing carefully.

“He’s a man, so he thinks he is.” They shared a laugh and Anna found herself being the one to initiate the hug this time. “Off with you now. He’s been in the yard since before daybreak, I’ll guess.” Anna lifted the basket from the counter, not surprised when Sally plopped a straw hat on her head. “Part of the uniform around here, we all spend a lot of time in the sun, but we try to be smart about it.” She left Anna to wander out to the yard on her own.

* * * *

Just beginning to wonder if she had gone in the wrong direction, she spotted Chance standing up from his crouched position. His oilskin hat gave his profile a new depth, one Anna was enjoying from a distance. All of him was enjoyable to look at, she thought, glancing at the cloth that stretched across his shoulders. The sleeves were rolled back, and the sight of his hands made her tingle at the thought of them touching her.

You're in deep here, Anna, she thought. But that was just it. She wanted to be with Chance in all the ways possible. Was it really only a few short weeks since they first met in the elevator? How could she have such strong feelings for someone she knew so little about?

Isn't it supposed to take time to fall in love? Her own thoughts startled her. Placing the basket on the ground in front of her, she stood between the rows of vines, realizing that she was in love. What was most strange was that she wasn't scared. "Now I know I'm crazy," she said aloud, for no one but herself to hear.

* * * *

Chance caught a glimpse of her while she was still several hundred yards down the path. His stomach clenched as he watched her walk slowly toward him, both hands holding the weight of the basket. He couldn't see her eyes. The brim of the hat shielded them. He could see her long, slim, denim-clad legs. He saw the small of her waist where her shirt tucked into the band of the jeans. He saw the woman he loved. Finally, after all of this time, he had found her. Now his only problem was to find out if she wanted to be found. He watched as she put the basket down, staring.

He stood and stretched, taking the time to watch her openly. She seemed frozen in place, he thought, so he started toward her. His movements made her pick up the basket and head toward him, slowly.

He was still several yards from her when he began to speak. "I was beginning to think you wouldn't come." Reaching her in a few steps, he relieved her of her parcel, pausing to kiss her cheek lightly.

"Sorry, I started wandering and..." Her eyes caught his.

"Ileanna, what's wrong? Too much sun?"

"No. It's just not how I imagined it."

"It usually isn't." He smiled, his gaze intense.

"Are we still talking about the vineyard?"

"Only if you want to be."

"What else could there be?"

Chance held his ground, narrowing his eyes, but not looking away from her. "I promised Louis you'd be safe here this weekend."

"Aren't I?"

"Not when you look at me like that." He dropped the basket, gathered her in his arms, and kissed her with abandon. When he finally let her go, they both took a moment to steady themselves. He regained his composure first, grabbed the basket, and took her by the hand, leading her down the aisle, crossing over several rows until he found the spot he wanted.

"This is the best shade around here. Are you hungry?"

"Yes," she answered, although her voice sounded strange to him. Anna sipped the wine he poured alternately between bites of her sandwich. "Sally sure knows how to pack a picnic." She was groping for a safe topic.

"Years of practice. Charlotte and I spent many a season on this land. Sally was God sent when Lottie was born."

"Chance." Anna took the glass from his hand, placing it carefully on the ground beside him. Slowly, she raised herself up on her knees, eye level to him.

Leaning in, he could smell the clean scent she carried, soap and lavender, he thought. Her lips met his, dancing across his with abandon. When she pulled back, she handed him his glass. "I wanted

to do that last night, but you didn't let me." Her voice held a challenge and a question.

"Last night, you had too much wine to drink. I don't take advantage of ladies in a weakened condition." He tried to joke, but her gaze wouldn't let him. He drained his glass, and then leaned back against the large tree trunk. With her staring at him intently, he finally gave in. "What? Do you want to hear that it almost killed me to leave you alone last night? It did. And you'll never really know how much." His fingers found her cheek, stroking lightly.

"You promised Louis."

"I did."

"What about what I want?"

"When you decide, let me know." His voice had gone low, husky, and rough. Slowly she reached a hand to his leg. The material of his jeans was taut across them, soft and worn, now tightly outlining his erection. She let her hand run up his thigh until she came to the junction of his legs. Her eyes met his as her hand grazed across the fabric straining to contain him. He let her continue for a few moments before catching her wrist with his hand. "You can't have it both ways, Anna."

"I know." She didn't look away. Chance liked that about her. She wasn't one to back down. "I've decided what I want." Again, she started to stroke him, and again he caught her wrist.

"Ileanna?"

"Yes, Chance?"

"You're driving me crazy. Someday I'll kick myself for this, but..." He pulled away from her, rising to stand to the side. He didn't look at her. He seemed to be watching the yard, off in the distance. "We're not alone, Anna." It was a simple statement, one that took her by surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"The extra security is still on site. I'm not sure where, but they're here."

“Oh.” It made Chance realize they were thinking about two different things.

“You can’t think that I don’t want you?”

“I’m not sure what I was thinking.”

“Well, I’m thinking I don’t want an audience when we make love, Anna.”

“How about just sex, then?” She teased him out of his solemn mood.

“Never just sex between us. There’s too much love between us to just be sex.” He waited for his words to sink in, wondering what she would say. Surprisingly, nothing until she had thought it through.

“What about a quickie?” She had started to pack up the basket, careful to gather all the wrappings, buying time, he realized, watching how carefully she wrapped each wine glass in a cloth napkin.

“Even quickies are done with love, Anna.” That one left her speechless for only a bit.

“Charlotte told me there’s a path to the beach off the garden. I thought I’d take a walk later.”

“It’s a beautiful spot.” He helped her rise, taking the basket from her. “I’ve got a few hours’ work left here. I’ll join you later.” He kissed her lips lightly, handed her the basket, and turned away.

“I’ll meet you on the beach later.” He took several long strides to put some distance between them before turning back. “Anna, be careful of the sun.”

“All right. I’ll see you later.”

* * * *

He found her just as the late afternoon sun lost its heat. She had settled herself in the small cove to the right of the path. Standing motionless, he watched as she painted with light brush strokes, alternating between a small jar of water and the pallet. Something struck him, but he couldn’t figure it out. Somehow, she just seemed so

familiar. After spending this much time with her, he figured he had seen her in his dreams. But, at times, just now, a certain tilt of her head gave him a flash of memory. Then it was gone as fast as it came. The cove protected her from the worst of the wind, but her hair was tousled from it. She continued to paint, intent on what she was doing. It was so much a part of who she was, yet he was given no access to her work. Chance wondered if he'd ever be allowed access to her studio. He'd stood before the glass nymph door several times, but she never offered to open that door to him. Now he wondered if she ever would. Bringing her here was his way of sharing a bit of himself. Anna still wasn't ready to share that deeply with him. It was part of the reason he continued to hold her at bay when it came to sex. He knew once they made love, separating wouldn't be an option for him. Shaking off his depressive mood, he made a point of being lively as he joined her.

* * * *

Not sure how long he had been standing there, Anna smiled and went about cleaning up and closing her paints. By the time he reached her, she had it all tucked away in the canvas tote.

"Want some company?"

"Yes, please. Besides, it's your beach." She smiled, shielding her eyes with her hand. Chance kneeled down next to her, taking the kisses he had dreamed of all afternoon. Releasing her, his eyebrows knitted together. "What's wrong?"

"Your hand, you were painting with your left."

"Yes, well, practicing is more like it." He sat down next to her, pulling her onto his lap.

"So, you're ambidextrous, are you?"

"When it comes to some things, I am." Her laughter bubbled up, even though she tried to hold it back. He shook his head, and then

rearranged her between his legs, his arms crossed over in front of her, holding her to him.

Chance sat for a long time, silent. Anna only shifted once or twice, snuggling closer. Her hand stroked the exposed portion of his arms.

His kiss was light. At first she thought it was the wind tossing her hair against her ear. Then she felt it again and couldn't hold back from wanting more. She turned her head, finding his mouth with hers, searching for his heartbeat, for a small slice of surrender from him. When it came, Anna felt it jolt through her, the force of him overwhelming. She lightened her attack on his mouth, teasing and taunting him until just the brink, then relaxing. Forcing herself, she pulled away and slowly turned back to the water. She felt his ragged breath, then the even beating once again. She didn't want to name the emotion she felt, afraid to accept what she already knew deep inside.

"We'd better head back. I need time for a shower before we leave."

"Where are we going?"

"Out for supper, there's a great little place not far from here."

"Chance, thanks for the weekend. I'm almost ashamed to admit it, but I'm enjoying it immensely. I can't remember when I've felt so relaxed."

"You're welcome. I'm glad you're here too." He let her go, struggling to stand without toppling on her. She didn't move, making it harder for him. Looking down, she knew he'd see her sly grin as she reached up, slapping his butt. Totally taken aback for a second, he leered down at her.

"Just remember, once the weekend is over, my promise to Louis has been kept. Then, my dear..." He reached a hand down to help her up. He never finished his thought. Her mouth closed over his. Anna had never been so bold before, but she liked the new feelings.

* * * *

Supper had gone by in a flash for Anna. The tavern was crowded and loud. She had been introduced to more people than she could possibly remember and had thoroughly enjoyed the evening. King and Charlotte met them there. Lottie was with friends for the evening. Sally had mentioned earlier that she was going to a movie with a friend, so Anna hadn't expected her to join them. In the car on the way home, Chance finally asked what was on his mind.

"What do you think of the place, Anna?" His tone was serious. She knew not to tease. She was careful to choose her words.

"I think it's beautiful and a lot of work and a lot of pleasure. You seem different when you're here."

"This is where I feel at home, Ileanna."

"What about the ranch?"

"That's more like a vacation house."

"Is it because you still feel you have to assert yourself with King?" Chance took a quick glance at her, returning his eyes to the road. Shaking his head, he started to laugh.

"We worked that all out years ago. He had Charlotte and the ranch. I have the vineyard and the ranch, in that order."

"What about the city?"

"It's a convenience, Anna. My heart is here. Where is yours?" They drove in silence for a while. He was turning into the driveway when she finally answered.

"I'd like to see the ranch before I answer that question. It's the only way I can make an informed decision." She winked, having successfully navigated around the potential land mine he set before her.

"I like a woman who thinks before she speaks." He shut off the engine and reached for her. "Are you tired? What would you like to do?"

"Now that's a loaded question if I've ever heard one." She bolted from the car, waiting on the top step, her urge to take him in the

vehicle overwhelming. Any one of the household could have come home and she didn't want to get caught in a compromising position. "How about a walk in the moonlight?"

"You'll need a sweater." She kissed the tip of his nose and headed inside, returning to find him in the kitchen waiting. "Ready?"

"Yes." She took his arm, but paused when they reached the pool. "Chance, can't we walk in the vineyard?"

He stared, not believing what she asked. "I figured you'd want to walk the beach."

"Another time." She started to pull him toward her, but he stood firm.

"Ileanna, the beach tonight, the security is still on duty." She watched him for a moment, and finally relented, heading in the direction of the beach path.

"Lucky for you, Chance Walker."

"Safer, but definitely not lucky." He held her hand tightly as they wandered the rocky beach. They walked for almost a mile before turning around. When they reached the path, Anna passed it, heading to the small cove she had sat in earlier. "No, Anna." He tugged her hand, finally getting her attention. "The rocks are quite uncomfortable."

"And you know this how?" she teased.

"I know. It's late. We'd better get back."

"Why are you distancing yourself from me, Chance?"

"Because it's the only way I can keep my hands off you."

"And you promised Louis."

"Something like that. You're worth the wait." He kissed her lightly, lifting her up onto his shoulder in a firefighter's carry. He took the path, carrying her with no trouble.

When he reached the edge of the patio, he paused. "Anna?"

"Chance, put me down, you idiot," she chastised, laughing the whole way.

"I intend to, Anna." She felt him slip off her sandals, tossing them to the side. When he dropped her into the pool, she knew it was coming, but the shock of the cool water still jolted her, the scream escaping before she could choke it back. He was next to her before she surfaced, although she noted he had taken the time to strip to his briefs. "We're still not even, you know."

"Oh, I know." She fought to keep the skirt of her dress from floating up, finally pulling it up and off with a lot of splashing. Tossing it onto the patio, she floated toward him, her hands in front of her, chasing him toward the deep end.

"Anna, it's late..."

"You chose the time for a swim, Chance. I was ready to head inside and get a good night sleep." Anna understood her coy voice didn't fool him for a second. When she swam past one of the underwater lights, he would realize her white lace bra and panties had become translucent against her skin, and she wondered how he'd react. He didn't cover his groan. Instead, he raced to the other end of the pool, pulling himself out of the water just before she reached him.

"You have to be quicker around here than that, Anna," he teased. She swam a few laps until he returned wrapped in a terry robe. He went to the ladder, holding a second one for her. She decided to float over, on her back, letting the moonlight glisten against her wet skin. Knowing she was driving him crazy made it more fun.

This was one of the few times in her life she felt sexy, almost wanton. That was the difference with Chance. She was all female with him, not just feminine. It brought back a memory of her cowboy lover from years before. She shook off the idea that somehow Chance could take his place.

Safely wrapped, Chance kissed her then gathered their clothes. At her bedroom door, he simply kissed her good night and left her. She stood out in the hall for a long time, wondering whether to go to him or not. In the end, she decided not to. Sleep evaded her until early the next morning.

* * * *

She heard voices, waking to laughter coming from the pool. Chance and Lottie were racing, and Anna almost thought that Lottie might win. She threw on a suit, bypassed the offer of coffee, and headed to the pool. Chance's back was to her and Lottie kept talking. Anna was able to slip down the ladder, taking only a few strokes to reach him. With one burst of energy, she came out of the water and brought him back under with her.

Chance accepted he was outnumbered and seemed to love every minute of attention.

After an energetic swim, everyone went to change for brunch. When he left her at her door, he laughed, shaking his head.

"Next time, remind me to fall in love with a woman who's afraid of the water." No sooner had he finished the statement, his face began to turn red.

Anna stood in the doorway, watching him, not sure how to answer his statement. Finally, she pushed herself away from the door and took the few steps to him. Eye to eye, she ran her hand along his chin, stopping to pull him to her brusquely for a kiss. She released him and told him quietly, "There won't be any others." She closed her door, leaving him to think what he wanted. He had no idea that she had slid to the floor, amazed at her own boldness.

* * * *

Anna was invited to spend the afternoon with Charlotte and Lottie. There was a wedding that afternoon and Lottie was asked to sing before the service. Sitting in a back pew of the church, she couldn't help the tears that slid down her cheek as she listened to Lottie's voice.

"I had no idea," she whispered to Charlotte, who handed her a tissue. She merely nodded her head, knowing her daughter's voice could stir anyone's heart. After the service, she waited by the car for the ladies to return from wishing the couple a long and happy life.

On the way back to the house, Anna couldn't help her enthusiasm. "Lottie, you sing so beautifully. I thought you played the piano."

"That too, but I'm much better with a song."

"Chance could have played professionally," Charlotte added. She didn't seem surprised by the look she got in return.

"I heard him yesterday morning. I didn't know he played either."

"For Chance, it's just a hobby. It relaxes him."

"Yeah, but look out when he starts to play certain pieces." Lottie let out a low whistle to punctuate her words. Charlotte and Lottie both began to laugh.

"What am I missing, ladies?" She was enjoying their company, feeling at ease with them after such a short time.

"Friday, Chance was playing Mozart. Something was on his mind," Charlotte offered.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. The more drab the music, the darker his mood," Lottie added.

"Thanks for the information. I'll file it away for future reference." They all had a good laugh over it, enjoying the ice cream cones Charlotte had detoured for.

"Not a word to King or Chance. We'll never live it down," she joked.

"Especially since we didn't bring any back for them," added Lottie.

"My lips are sealed. We ladies have to stick together." Anna was beginning to feel at home with these women.

The rest of the afternoon slid by quickly. Chance and King were in the yard when they returned, so Lottie went for a walk with Anna. It was informative to say the least, she decided. She learned Sally

went to stay at the apartment in New York when Chance had to be out of town, and Lottie had already taken her GED exam and was technically a high school graduate at fifteen. She was off to Italy in September to study with a new voice coach. As they wandered, she spotted King and Chance in the distance. Lottie ran ahead, receiving a hug from her father, while Chance tousled her hair. When she reached them, King was ready to head back. Lottie joined him, while Chance asked Anna to wait for him.

She watched as he inspected the vines in the general area, satisfied that there were no insects to inflict damage on the precious growing leaves. As they wandered back to the house, Chance spoke quietly.

“Will you come to Texas with me next week?”

“I don’t know. I’m on a deadline for this project. It would depend on how much work I can catch up on this week.”

“No demure excuses?” She stopped walking, amazed that he would say something like that. He was several paces ahead when he realized he was alone.

“How could you say something like that to me, Chance Walker? From the moment we’ve met, I’ve tried to be completely honest with you. Don’t force your insecurities about our relationship in my lap. I’m not afraid of commitment.” She brushed past him, leaving him to think about what she had said.

When she returned to the house alone, King raised an eyebrow. “Chance stopped to check some vines,” she explained, then went inside.

* * * *

When Chance made his way to the house, he bypassed everyone, heading upstairs to shower. Under the cool water, he realized that she was right. She had told him she knew what she wanted, and he had to admit she had been able to get her idea across to him in the vineyard yesterday afternoon. The thought roused him instantly and he turned

off the hot water completely. When he finally made it downstairs a short while later, he wasn't surprised at what he saw. Anna sat on a bar stool at one end of the counter, frosting a chocolate cake with chocolate icing. Lottie was chopping vegetables, while Charlotte was sautéing onions and peppers in a skillet on the stovetop. They had the Temptations on in the background and all three were singing very loud and very off key to the music. He leaned in the doorjamb, watching the three ladies put together their evening meal. It wasn't until Lottie noticed him there that he finally entered the room.

"I'll be bartender. What would you ladies like?"

"I'll wait for supper, thanks." Anna answered warmly, her smile genuine. He pressed his hand to her waist as he passed, dropping a light kiss on her cheek. Returning with a tray full of drinks, he set down a sparkling water in front of her anyway.

"Thank you." She hesitated, but went on. "Will you play for us while we cook?"

"Sorry, ma'am, no concert dates scheduled. Lottie, you play, I'll finish chopping."

"That's not what she asked. We're supposed to make guests feel welcome, remember? You play." He looked torn, then glanced at Anna with a look acknowledging she boxed him in neatly.

"The one time she remembers her manners. What would you like to hear?"

Without a thought, she answered. "Rhapsody In Blue, if you know it."

Chance left the kitchen, pausing to turn off the stereo then returning to stop in front of Anna.

Whispering, he added, "My concerts don't come cheap. Can you afford me?"

"Nothing worthwhile is cheap in this life."

He shook his head as he headed to the piano. He'd play for Anna.

* * * *

Hearing the first strains of her favorite piece, she stopped icing, entranced in the sounds he created.

Charlotte took the spatula from her, prodding her from the seat. “Go and enjoy. I’ll finish here.” She pressed her cheek to Anna’s before she all but pushed her from the kitchen. Again, she stood in the archway, listening to him play. When he finished, he didn’t turn around, simply started playing the rest of the Gershwin tunes he knew. The concerto in F thrilled her as much as the tones from *An American in Paris*. When he stopped, she stood motionless. He closed the cover over the keys, watching her.

“You really could have played professionally.”

“I don’t like big audiences. I play for myself...and now for you, Ileanna.”

“Supper’s ready,” Charlotte called, breaking their moment.

* * * *

On the drive back to Manhattan Monday afternoon, Anna commented that the weekend had gone by so quickly.

“When will you know if you’ll be able to get away next week?”

“Give me until Wednesday to see how much I can get done. By then I should be able to tell if I’ll meet my deadline.”

“I’d really like it if you could. Is it something you can pack up and bring with you?” He watched as she thought about it, scrunching her nose as he had become accustomed to her doing while she was thinking.

“I’ve never really thought about it. I’ve always just worked from the apartment.”

“Think about it. I’d love for you to come.”

Chapter Ten

Everyday life changed for Anna. Her usual routine bored her. The project was going well she had to admit to herself. Tuesday night, she wrestled with her conscience. Talking to herself, she fought it out, deciding to make a list.

Plus-Chance is wonderful and I want to spend time with him.

Minus-What lengths will Scott go to trying to sabotage us?

Plus-He makes me feel like a woman again.

Minus-He lives on Long Island and the ranch. The city is only a stopover for him. It's where I've always lived.

Plus-His family is wonderful and I enjoyed the time I spent with them.

Minus-We never talked about having a family.

Plus-Minus-Plus-Minus-Ileanna had a two-page list when she had finished.

Tossing the pad to the side, she resigned herself to the one thought she couldn't put on paper. Standing on the balcony listening to the sounds of New York, Anna finally said the words aloud. "Chance Walker, I've fallen in love with you." Sitting on one of the lounge chairs, Anna wished her mother was still here for her to talk with. She wished Eddie was still here to talk to. As the afternoon sun faded, she realized the truth. It was Chance she wanted to talk to, Chance that she should be having this discussion with. Without a second thought, she went to the phone.

"How's your day going?" She started.

“I’ve had better until now.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Anna knew her tone was suggestive and wondered what Chance’s facial expression looked like at that moment.

“Tell me you’ll come to the ranch with me this weekend.”

“All right, I’ll come to the ranch with you this weekend.” She held back a laugh.

“Anna, are you serious or just teasing me?”

“I’m serious, if it’s a serious offer?”

“What about work?” he questioned.

“If I stay focused the rest of the week, I should be all right.” She didn’t tell him the project was technically finished. Knowing that, she would be able to enjoy her time away and still make her deadline.

“You just made me very happy.”

“Call me later in the week with the details. I’ve got to get back to work.”

* * * *

Gus called up at nine thirty that night. Chance stood waiting for Anna to open the door, his arms laden with a pizza box and three dozen tulips. He knew she would be working so he took a chance. He didn’t want to wait until the weekend to see her.

Anna pulled open the door for him and Chance once again felt the earth shake under him. How could she look so beautiful? She had no makeup on and her hair was a riot of dark curls. She had on cut-off shorts and a man’s shirt, the one with the black paint strokes along the sleeve. Again, she was bare foot. Her smile choked his breath.

“Surprise! I figured if you were working, you’d still need to eat.” She stepped back, allowing him to enter. “How’s the work going?”

“Good. Come to the kitchen.” Following her down the hall, he noted she paused then shut the nymph door to her studio as they passed.

Not yet, he thought. Anna motioned for him to put the pizza on the table and then set about taking down plates and napkins. She set out two cold long-necked beers then grabbed a vase for the tulips.

“Can you leave Friday afternoon?”

“I think so. What should I pack, and how long are we going to be gone?” They shared their pizza and the beers, discussing what she would need to bring with her to the ranch.

“I’ll have you home Tuesday night.” He didn’t stay long, just time enough for a long good-night kiss at her door. “I’ll pick you up around one.”

“Sounds good to me. I’m looking forward to seeing your ranch.”

“Think of it as a quick vacation.” He had the door open and was turning to leave.

“Chance, is there a swimming pool?” She bit back a laugh, but he let his out.

“Yes, there’s a pool. I’ll see you Friday. Get your work done so you can relax.”

* * * *

Ileanna watched the night sky as they circled over the airport, waiting their turn to land. Chance was at the controls and it left her with a peaceful feeling. Their time at the ranch had flown by. It wasn’t what she had been expecting. She had envisioned a dry and dusty homestead, but found a welcoming log structure that even housed the pool. It was a sprawling one-story home with a veranda and a green house. The pool was at one end of the enclosure and the plants filled the other, filtering around the pool area, turning it into a sort of grotto. It was modern and comfortable. King and Charlotte had been warm and welcoming.

Her passion while she was there had been riding. She had taken lessons when she was a child, but didn’t have access to horses lately.

Chance had told her Saturday morning that he would ride out for most of the day.

He had been surprised to find her waiting in the barn for him and it confused him more when he realized she could ride as well as him. She had made friends with a horse named Sparkle and rode each day she was there. It was a relaxing place to be, educational beyond her dreams. Riding with Chance, she learned more about cattle than she could ever remember, enjoying the way he would talk about the land and the stock. She saw the same passion in him as she did at the vineyard, but not to the same degree.

Now ready to land back in New York, she sighed. The only thing that did surprise her was that Chance still hadn't made a move to be with her. He was attentive and kind, he was fun to be with and kissed her often, but he didn't make that one move to put them in the same bed together.

On Sunday afternoon, they rode out for over an hour before they stopped to water the horses by a small stream. Chance laid out a picnic lunch along with a plaid blanket. In Ileanna's mind, this was the perfect spot for their first sexual encounter. The sun was high in the sky with a warm breeze. But Chance just diplomatically dismissed her advances. The rest of their time was spent as "good friends" might spend a non-sexual weekend.

It annoyed her, but she went with his mood. She tried not to let it bother her, but she knew something wasn't quite right. She just didn't know exactly how or why. Lying on the blanket, sated from lunch and wine, she couldn't get the image of them fucking in the stairwell so many years ago out of her mind. One option was to confront him with the information. Would he remember their interlude, or was it just emblazoned in her memory? If she talked to him about it, he might not handle it well, and that was the last thing she wanted, so she enjoyed the memory of his hands and lips touching her, without verbalizing her need for his sexual attention, then and there. The rest of their trip was uneventful and she spent most of her time sketching

the landscapes and trying to ignore the inner ache in her pussy and the way her breasts were heavy with need.

Carrying her suitcase up to the apartment, she invited him to stay for supper, and was surprised when he declined.

"I have work to catch up on." He kissed her and was about to leave when she finally found the words.

"Chance, before you go, we need to get something straightened out." Anna saw the look he gave her, but didn't back down. She poured them both a glass of wine, his label. He delivered a case to her the day they left for the ranch. Now as she handed him a glass, she tried to choose her words carefully. "I had a wonderful time at the ranch, but I'm confused."

"You want to know why I haven't pushed you into bed yet."

"Something like that. You seem interested, yet every time I make an advance, you pat me on the head, so to speak, and send me on my way. What's the problem, Chance?" Watching him as he put down the glass, she watched him wander to the window.

"I don't want to push you, Anna. I want you to be sure this is what you want."

"I've tried to tell you, you are what I want." She paused, biting her lip for control. "What I want is to be with you, in all ways. Chance, why won't you make love with me?"

"Because if we do there's no turning back, Anna. Once I've had you in my bed, I won't let you go. Can you understand that? I'm talking the long haul here, marriage, family, forever after." He still didn't turn to look. "I love you, Ileana. I want you for my wife, for the rest of my life. I'm willing to wait for you to decide if you want the same."

She was speechless for a long time, afraid to say the wrong thing. "How long have you felt this way?"

"Since the night at the party, when I was wiping the chalk from your cheek. I looked at you, this beautiful woman all dressed up for a party, yet there you were, with a blue streak across your cheek. It said

to me that you had a passion for your work. I want you to have the same passion for me.”

“I think I do, Chance. You won’t let me find out if it’s real or not.” Anna didn’t add that she already felt a physical and emotional tie to him since the first time they’d been together so long ago. She wanted to be honest, and wondered again, if she brought it up would he finally make love to her or would it be a final blow to the relationship. If he realized she was the witch he’d fucked in the hallway on Halloween so many years ago, would that end their budding relationship? She wasn’t willing to take the chance. Not yet. When they knew each other better she might find the courage. In the end, Anna decided it would become known in its own time. Probably an inconvenient one, but in time.

“Anna, did you sleep with Scott before your wedding?” She was quiet, not sure where this was leading.

“Actually, no.”

“You said once that he wasn’t family from the time you got home from your honeymoon. What did you mean?” This time she turned away from him.

This was the first time she had backed down. After considering her options, Anna decided to go with the truth and see if he could handle it. “Scott and I met just before my mother died. It all went so quick. I suppose I was looking to fill the void in my heart. He was a good friend during that time and when he pushed for marriage...I should have waited.”

“But you didn’t.”

“No. I let him push me, and it was a mistake.”

“Why? What did you find out after your trip?”

“I found out he had a girlfriend waiting for him when he returned. A girlfriend he didn’t intend to stop seeing.”

“How long did it last?” His voice was low, his words merely a whisper.

Anna watched his hands fist at his sides, but his tone was even, controlled, she decided. "A few months. I couldn't live with the knowledge he was still seeing her."

"What was his position?"

"That I should grow up. Lots of men had mistresses, and I should be thankful I was the one to carry his name, to get the perks of being his wife. So what if he spent a few afternoons with someone else. He didn't think it should have affected us." She paused for breath, her words coming out in a rush. "He told me I was being childish."

"Did you feel childish?"

"No. I felt betrayed. He pushed for the wedding, not me."

"Was it April he was seeing?"

"Yes, only at the time I didn't know who she was, only that he had a girlfriend."

They were quiet for a long time, Chance standing before the window, Anna sitting on the sofa, watching his back rise and fall with each breath. Finally, she broke the silence.

"Chance, that was a long time ago. I've grown up since then. I've come to terms with the loss of my mother and Eddie. I want to have an adult relationship with you, a loving, caring relationship. You wouldn't let us."

"I want you to be sure."

"How can we truly be sure if we're not together?"

"We just need some time. Can't we just go on this way for a little while longer? I wanted to romance you, to..."

"I want you to make love with me. That's romantic."

"And we will, when it's right."

Something snapped inside her. Wanting to hold back the rage, her hands fisted at her sides, but her mouth spilled her feelings with words.

"Only when you decide it's right. I don't have a say in it. The timing isn't up to me, strictly you making all the decisions."

"I'm trying to be fair, Anna." He was across the room in two long strides. Kneeling before her, he held her face with his hand, forcing her to look. "I could have bedded you any time I wanted to, from the night of the party on. I chose to respect you more than that. I am trying to build something permanent, not a few weeks of sex then on to the next."

"I resent the accusation that you think I would sleep with you or anyone else just for the fun of it, as you put it at this time in my life. I'm not looking for the next one, Chance. I thought you were it." She pushed past him, pausing to refill her glass.

"Thanks for a lovely few weeks. I'm sorry it didn't work out. Please tell Charlotte and Lottie that I enjoyed the time I spent with them." She walked to the willow door, opening it to the foyer.

"Are you tossing me out?" His face looked confused, but she knew she was right.

"No, Chance. I'm saying good-bye. For whatever reason, you seem to think I need to be coddled. What I need is to be held and made love to. You're apparently not the right man for the job. Please leave." She stood her ground, refusing to blink.

Chance stood, transfixed at her statement. Anna watched as her words hit home. Finally, his resistance seemed to break as his whole body shuddered. She watched him near. He picked her up, tossed her over his shoulder, and strode back into the living room. He very unceremoniously dumped her on the sofa, pausing only to tear away her shirt, buttons popping off and flying around the room. He pushed up her skirt, tearing away the silk underpants covering what he wanted so much.

Anna wasn't frightened of him, but she was surprised. His movements were quick, and before she realized it, he was smoothly inside her with one quick stroke. It wasn't until he caught his breath that she finally looked at him. Eye to eye, he took what they had been waiting so long for.

She watched Chance pull back the urge to hurry once he was buried inside her. She was tight around him and hot and wet, ready for him, pulling him deeper inside with her muscles. If he had wanted to teach her a lesson in sexuality, she was the one teaching him. Silently, she used her inner muscle control to bring him to a climax that left him sweating and breathless.

In the end, they both won, Anna several times as his length invaded and retracted inside her, with each push a new feeling of warmth and well being built inside, waiting for the final touch to push him beyond dreams. Anna's inner body clenched him tighter, pulling him deeper, goading his resistance.

Chance was struggling to hold back, biting his bottom lip, but when Anna's strangled cry escaped from her lips, he relented. He let himself finally fall over the edge, finding peace buried within her. Neither moved for several minutes. Chance lay crumpled on top of her, Anna sprawled on the couch under him.

* * * *

He felt her start to move under him, her arms going around him, holding him where she wanted him until she found the spot she needed. Then slowly, working only her pelvis, he came back to life inside her and eventually felt the demand she was making. This time, he went slow, enjoying her movements against him. His mouth found hers, invading and taking, then smoldering to a slow burn. He felt her relinquish her dominance over him, felt her participate rather than take. He used his strength to lift her from the couch onto the soft carpet. She held his face between her hands, keeping his gaze to hers, watching him until her eyes slipped closed.

Chance took her slowly, enjoying the rhythmic motion she demanded. When he paused for air, she rolled on top of him. His hands searched her body, and he held and touched, caressing her back and breasts as she worked her inner magic on him. He could feel the

difference in her movements, knew she was coming close to the edge. Watching her eyes slowly close, he went over the edge with her, surrendering to her until she slipped down to rest against his chest.

“My God, Ileanna.” It was a mere whisper, but he saw the smile it brought to her face, one he’d never seen from her before. “I can’t believe...”

She lifted her head from his chest, choosing to kiss him, passionately. When she felt him stir inside her, she started to move with his motion, his hands holding her steady.

“I’m sorry, Anna. I didn’t mean to attack you.”

“I’m not sorry. I haven’t felt this good...ever.” She started to laugh, then took off the rest of her shirt that had been hanging half on, half off her. She straightened the lace that used to be called a bra, and then found the clasp and took it off. Her movements made him stir once again.

Chance had never felt so alive. He never had the stamina she created in him. Her hands were stroking his chest lightly, making small circles around his nipples. He caught her wrists with his hands, bringing them to his lips, kissing her palms gently.

“Would you like that glass of wine now?” All he could do was laugh and nod at her suggestion. He felt her twist above him, sending a new shock wave directly to his erection still buried inside her. She sipped from the glass, shifting her weight back onto his thighs, allowing him to sit forward and drink from the glass. When it was empty she put it aside.

“What do we do now?” Anna asked him, still grinding her hips against him. In a fluid motion, he turned her on her back, taking the top. His hands began to explore her. They grazed over her full breasts, teasing her already erect nipples. His mouth closed over one, then the other, alternating until he realized she was close to the edge again. Her hands sought the pile of the carpet for something to hold until they found their rhythm. Releasing her grip, she ran her nails up and down his sides, giving him chills that sent an electric pulse to his

penis. Anna grabbed his face, pulling him down to kiss her. As she did, he felt her find release, realizing he too was on the edge. Biting his bottom lip, his groan came as he did. Finally, she relaxed her grip, using her tongue to soothe the bite she had taken from his lip. When he rolled off her, his arm went to cover his eyes.

“Jeez, Anna, are you trying to kill me?” His voice was light, teasing, as they had come to depend on.

“Of course not, I just wanted you to understand I was serious.” She turned to look at him and they both started to laugh.

“This isn’t how I pictured our first time.” He grinned at her.

“Me either. Maybe that was the problem. We were both waiting for the perfect moment.”

“I’d say you managed to find it.” His fingers lightly ran along her rib cage, and he watched as her nipples tightened.

“I bet I can find a better way...come with me.” She started to shift their positions.

He was amazed that she could jump up so quickly when his energy was drained. It took him a few minutes to get rid of the rest of his clothes, and then he went in search of her. He could hear the water running, figuring he’d find her in the shower. The door to her bedroom was open. Chance stood in the doorway, frozen.

He wasn’t sure what he had expected, but it wasn’t this. From the doorway, he saw a king size bed against the inside wall. Anyone laying in it would wake to the New York skyline. The carpet was a light gray, the walls covered with a padded lighter gray flannel. The silk bedspread matched the curtains that formed a half canopy around it. There were two steps up to the bed, each lighted from underneath. On closer inspection, he realized tiny seed pearls had been sewn to an outer layer of netting covering the silk canopy overhead.

He never would have expected such a formal master bedroom, especially for Anna. He had been expecting florals and stripes, not quilted silks and flannel. She came from an inner doorway, stripped to

the skin. She watched him take in the room then walked to him. Taking his hand, she pulled him toward the master bath.

Once in the doorway, he saw he was wrong about the shower. A large whirlpool tub was filling with steamy water. Anna paused to broadcast sea salts over the top of the increasing water level then she turned to him.

The bathroom wasn't what he expected either. Again, function was the key, all the fixtures in a soft dove gray. The walls here were covered in nubby gray tweed, the shimmering glass shower enclosure etched with a recurring ivy leaf pattern. She motioned him toward the tub, waiting for him to settle. Just as she was about to join him, she smiled. "Be right back."

Anna returned with the wine bottle and their glasses. Setting them on the shelf behind the tub, she lowered herself into the soothing warm water, positioning herself with her back against his chest.

"Now, Chance, would you like to talk about commitment?" she teased.

"I love you, Ileanna." he whispered in her ear.

"I love you too, Chance. It's about time." He twisted her sideways, kissing the rest of her statement away. Lust grew, deepening their kiss.

"This wasn't the way I planned for this to happen, Anna." He was playing with her breasts under the water.

"Sometimes you can't plan things, Chance. You just have to let them happen." She slipped her hand behind her, encircling him, stroking him. She didn't see his smile as he grew in her hand, the promise of things to come.

* * * *

Anna was relieved Louis was happy. He was thrilled her relationship was working out with Chance Walker. In the last month, he had met King and Charlotte Walker during a concert in which

Lottie sang a solo. He liked them both, seeing how they accepted Anna as one of their own. The only thing still nagging at the back of her mind was what Scott had in mind. There had been little seen or heard from him lately. April had attended several charity functions alone, explaining his back had gone out, and he was on bed rest.

Bed rest, she thought. Whose bed is he resting in these days? But in the end, she knew it wasn't her problem. Anna and Chance were happy. That was all that should matter. Chance had lessened the security at the vineyard, but kept a skeleton crew on just in case. There hadn't seemed to be any problems at the ranch. She knew Chance was on the alert, and decided to let him handle his own business.

She knew Louis had lunch with Ben several times, aware it was difficult to see his old friend worrying about his daughter. Ben had assured him April had made her peace with Scott, and he was behaving.

Anna was almost walking on the clouds. Her illustrations had received great praise and she was waiting for the finished text of the next in the series. She had done several small jobs for the agency, but was enjoying the summer to its fullest. She traveled with Chance whenever she could. She'd been to the ranch several times and to the vineyard every weekend that he had gone. She felt a sparkle and vitality in her that had long been missing. She walked with a bounce in her step. She just couldn't get rid of the nagging feeling that the other shoe was about to hit the ground.

Chapter Eleven

Anna returned from Margie's bridal shower in a great mood. All their wedding plans were on track and Will seemed to be beaming all the time. She and Chance had supper with them at least once a week now as couples. As their big day approached, even Chance seemed to get caught up in the madness surrounding them. He was supposed to have picked her up at Margie's apartment after the shower, but phoned telling her he would be delayed. This was the first time anything like that had happened, so she really didn't think twice about it. Now it was after nine, supper was still warming in the oven, and Chance still hadn't called or shown up.

Pacing the length of the living room, Anna sipped from a bottle of water. The wine was open, ready to be poured, but she didn't want to drink alone. What if something's happened? she wondered. Don't be silly. He's caught up with business, that's all.

At ten, her doorbell rang. She rushed to open it, finding a rumpled Chance standing in her doorway. He hadn't shaved, and his day old growth looked like he was starting to grow a beard. There was only darkness in his eyes.

"Chance, my God. What's happened? Come in." He stood in the doorway, looking her up and down. "What is it?" She watched as his hands clenched and unclenched several times. She knew he was fighting for control. "Chance, is Lottie all right? Is it King or Charlotte? Please tell me what's happened?" He didn't attempt to hide his anger. He took a few steps inside, waiting for her to follow him.

"I'll get you a drink." She brushed past him, not knowing what else to do. "Wine or coffee?"

He grabbed her by the upper arm and turned her, holding her just inches from him. "How could you do it, Anna? How could you and not tell me?"

"Chance, you're hurting me. What are you talking about?"

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?"

"Find out about what? You're not making any sense. What is it that I've supposedly done?" She slowly moved from his grasp and poured the wine with an abstract movement, noting he went to great lengths not to touch her as he begrudgingly took the glass. He glanced at it and put it aside. She left hers on the bar. "I knew sooner or later you'd remember. Now I'm glad it's out. What was the catalyst?"

He gave her a strange look, one she deciphered as complete confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"The Halloween party, you were the cowboy and I was the witch in black." Anna studied him, to her he was confused. "The witch you fucked in the hallway of the party." She let out the breath she'd been holding waiting for him to explode. Instead, she got a wave of his hand and a resigned sigh as he put his glass aside.

"That was you?" He looked her over from head to toe and back to her eyes. "I guess it could have been, the eyes...the breasts, but that's the last thing on my mind. I'm pissed about the rest of it all. Although it makes sense now, you'd do a stranger in the hallway. Back then I thought I was something special, now I realize I was just another fuck."

Anna's hand came up and slapped his cheek, her palm stinging when she dropped it back to her side. "I assumed I was just another conquest for the cowboy." She glared at him, but would not back down. Finally, he shook himself from the daze he'd fallen into and walked to the balcony. He didn't go out, only opened the doors for the fresh air he seemed to need.

"Anna, I know you must have been young, but you should have told me the rest. I brought you home with me, to my family."

“What is it then? I’m clueless here, and you obviously aren’t. If it’s not our one night fling, what are you talking about? Fill me in.” She poured the wine into two fresh glasses. He accepted the glass she pressed into his hand.

“I just can’t figure it out. You can’t say you needed the money. Was it just a kick for you? Didn’t you ever think there would be repercussions?”

That was it. Anna hit her breaking point. “Chance Walker, either tell me what it is you think I did so many years ago or...or...”

“Or what, Anna, you’ll go and do it again?” He watched as obvious confusion washed across her face. “Don’t play innocent with me. I should have known your talents weren’t natural. How many others were there?”

“I still don’t know what you want from me. What are you talking about?”

“God, Anna. We’ve talked about so many great things these last few weeks. Why couldn’t you trust me with this, why?”

She put down her glass and went to him, looking him in the eye. “I don’t know what’s happened. I assumed you finally realized we’d met at that damn Halloween party, but apparently, this is something different. You have to tell me so we can sort it out.”

“I can’t sort this one out, Anna. I can’t look at you the same way again. Your innocence is lost, gone before me in a flash. You’re not the woman I thought you were. I can’t accept you after this.” He took the glass he held and tossed it into the gas-burning fireplace. The liquid splattered against the back wall, the glass shattered on impact.

“How many others, Anna? I wouldn’t want to be flipping stations on the satellite and find it on the adult channel, you staring back at me.”

“Adult channel? Now you have gone crazy.” She dropped onto the couch, confused by all his rambling.

“Have you ever made a movie, Anna?”

“No.” Then silence. “Yes.”

“So you finally admit you made it. You weren’t drugged and forced to perform.”

“I had a few minutes of screen time in an old friend’s film, his thesis for film school.”

“Yeah, they give doctorates for that now?”

“I don’t know what you’ve seen, but the film I was in was a party scene. I was in the background for only a few seconds or so.”

“But you admit that you were in the film?”

“Yes, but like I said, only in the party scene, the background. He had the cameras rolling all night. I saw the presentation. It was a view on social and economic differences among college students, struggling in New York. As I remember, it went over very well.”

“What I saw was a lot more than ten seconds of background.” He went back to the window, searching for an answer in the star-riddled sky. “Did you know he had cameras in all the bedrooms, too?”

“No, why should I? I was there for all of maybe an hour. He told me about the screening a few months later. We were all very happy for him.”

“I’m not happy for him, Anna, or with you. I never thought you capable of doing something like this. Scott was wrong. I could accept you had been with him. He was your husband. But this, Anna, I can’t justify it any way I think of it.”

“Just what have I supposedly done on this film that offended you so?”

“God, you were so young, so different.”

“Chance?”

“I can’t have a woman for my wife that would perform sex acts for a camera.”

“*What?*” Her voice raised now, disbelief invading her brain. “It was a simple party scene. The only thing I might have done wrong was sip a drink, or laugh too much. Oh, and yes, there was a moment where we were dancing, but that was later in the film.”

“Oh, Anna, I’d hoped you’d at least admit it to me. I can understand you not broadcasting it all over, but to lie to me.” He was heading toward the door. Anna stayed on the couch.

“Whatever film you think I was in, I never had sex before a camera.”

“I have the proof, Anna. Stop lying, if not to me, at least to yourself.” He had her hallway door open, and then paused. “Does Louis know about this?”

“Of course not! It didn’t happen,” she said

“I’m truly sorry, Anna. I thought we had a future together. I see now we don’t.” He closed the door softly behind him. Anna threw her glass at him, managing to hit the inside of the now closed door.

“Damn that man, the minute I saw him I knew he’d be trouble. Back then and now. Only I’m not sure what else...I suppose it doesn’t matter.”

* * * *

Louis let himself into the apartment. Gus told him he didn’t think she had left the building in almost two weeks now. She had groceries delivered, but that was all. The apartment seemed intact. He called ahead, not wanting to frighten her.

“Anna, company’s here.” Opening the willow door, he still didn’t find her. Finally, he went to the studio. The nymph door was open. What he saw distressed him. She was hunched over her worktable, intent on what she was doing. He stood in the doorway, watching her. Her hair had lost its sheen, her skin dull. She had dropped several pounds he knew, from the hollow in her cheeks. The dark circles under her eyes bothered him the most. He knew the moment she finally saw him. Her startled intake of breath alerted him.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you, girl. I called out, but you didn’t answer.”

“What do you want?”

Louis felt the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. "I want to know what the hell is going on with you. You've been a no-show for weeks now, not only with me, but your friends too. You look like you've been dragged through the streets, and you have the audacity to ask what I want? I want to know what's happened!" He watched as she put down the brush she held, resigned to his intrusion.

"I'll make coffee. You shower. And no, I won't leave until I know what's going on." He strode from the doorway, leaving her no choice but to follow.

He spotted her leaning in the doorway to the kitchen watching him make the coffee. Leaning past him to take down the mugs, she went to the refrigerator. "Sorry, no milk."

"I'll survive. You go clean up. You look like hell."

Resigned, she went. She returned with her face washed and her hair brushed back just as he was putting the full mugs on the table.

"Ileanna, what has happened? You just dropped out of sight, no calls except to cancel meals. Even Margie called me, trying to find out what's wrong."

"She shouldn't have done that." It was a simple statement. She chose to stare out the window, rather than face him.

"Anna, has Chance hurt you?"

"No." She looked away again. "Yes, but not how you're thinking."

"Well you better explain, or I'll take it up with him."

* * * *

He stood to leave, Anna knowing she had to confide in him, or he would take it up with Chance, which was exactly what she didn't want. Slowly, she explained how he stormed in, accusing her of making pornographic films when she was younger. Not leaving out any of the details, including their one night of passion on Halloween, she finished with her throwing her glass at the door. Louis sat back,

aghast at what she told him. Anna watched him carefully. He never asked if she had made the film. He knew her better. Finally, when he released his fingers from their prayer position, he started to laugh. Not expecting laughter, she fixed a glare at him.

“Don’t you see, child. He’s won.”

“No, I don’t see.” She was about to toss the empty mug at him when he reached out to her, taking it from her, placing it carefully on the table. “Anna, Scott went with you to the screening, didn’t he? He must have gotten a copy of the movie.” He sat back, watching her digest his words. This time when she picked up the mug, he didn’t stop her, he simply ducked out of the way, listening to the pottery smash against the refrigerator door.

“That son-of-a-bitch. Grandfather, it’s the only explanation, but how?”

Louis held back a smile. At least he knew what they were dealing with now. “I don’t know for sure, but we do need to see what Chance saw, and most importantly, how he saw it.” She started to rock in her seat. “Go shower and get dressed. We have work to do. I’ll make some calls.”

Anna returned to the kitchen, finding Louis on the phone. She was dressed and looking like herself again, even if she had a dulled appearance.

“I’ve been thinking...” she started as he hung up the phone.

“And I’ve been working. Get your purse. We’re going to the film school. I’ll explain along the way.”

Several hours later, they sat in Louis’ living room, take-out Chinese food on the small table in front of them. It had been a very enlightening afternoon. Louis had charged into the dean’s office and left with a copy of the original film Charlie had used for his project. It had been a lesson in business negotiations to get it. They also made a stop at Chance’s apartment. Calling from the car, Louis found out Chance was out of town and wasn’t due back until the weekend. It was a school day and they knew Sally would be there. Convincing

Sally to give them the disc had taken some time. Her attitude stood with Chance along with her loyalty.

A simple statement had finally opened the door for them. "To think you actually let someone tattoo your back with that scroll work...you're an artist!"

Louis burst out laughing and enquired where the tattoo was. Once they were told the woman on the film had been marked on the lower back, Anna took her into the kitchen, pulling her shirt from the waistband of her pants, proving she had no marks, not even a birthmark in the area.

Sally had become very apologetic, even producing the original envelope the disc had been mailed in. It bore no return address, but both Louis and Anna knew whose chicken scratch handwriting it was. She told them Chance had come home one afternoon, found the disc in his mail, and gone ballistic several minutes later. He had apparently left, and Sally had let her curiosity overcome her. She had scanned the film, assuming from the first few minutes that Anna was on screen, that she was the brunette who had performed in the rest of the movie.

They chose not to view it with her, rather taking it back to Louis' apartment. First, they viewed the film Anna had seen. It was exactly as she remembered it. Of course, her hair was different, long and teased high. Her makeup was much heavier than she wore it now, but she had to remember that was the style ten years back.

After she cleared their plates, they settled down to watch the tape Chance was sent. The first three minutes of film was the same, but from then on, it became something even Louis blushed at.

"I don't know what to say."

"I do. Grandfather, I know this is awful, but look, you never really see the woman's face, only her long dark curly hair."

Louis watched with greater interest, noting she was right. Whoever had spliced the new film together had been good. The scenes from the party were more interspersed, showing the same few

minutes of Anna dancing over and over, different portions rearranged to make one think she was the star of the movie.

"It's amazing what you can do with a computer these days," Louis mused. Only the scrolled tattoo on the woman's lower back could prove her innocence. She shut the tape halfway through.

"I don't have implants. Chance would know that! I'm sorry you had to see that, Louis. But if he didn't watch the whole tape, he wouldn't have seen the tattoo or her implants."

"I'm sorry you had to see it too." He started to laugh, pursing his lips. "How would you like to handle this?"

"Give me some time to clear my bad reputation with Chance, and then we'll decide how to hang Scott."

* * * *

The air was humid. It made her shirt stick to her back as soon as she left the airport. The rental car was waiting, the air conditioning blowing cold air. She chose a hotel near the airport, wanting to arrive in the early morning, not late at night.

Remembering the directions, she arrived at the ranch just after sunup. She drove the car right up to the stable door, figuring he would be getting ready to ride out. Her first sight of him was as he lifted the blanket over the horse's back. His face was thinner, she could tell even under the heavy black beard that grew. She didn't want to startle the horse, so she waited until he stepped back to grab the saddle.

"Chance, would you please give me half an hour of your time?"

"Ileanna, go home. I don't want you here."

"You've made that very clear, however, I always thought you to be a fair man, and in all fairness, you had your say. Please allow me a few minutes to have mine."

Tossing the saddle to the side, he led the horse out to the paddock and turned him loose. "I really don't want to hear any excuses."

“No excuses, just the truth. Please come inside. It’s important.” She walked away, refusing to look back to make sure he was following her. Letting herself in through the kitchen door, Charlotte was shocked to see her.

“Anna, I didn’t know you were coming.” She was obviously surprised. “Coffee will be ready...”

“Neither did Chance. I’m not staying, Charlotte. Just a few minutes, and I’ll be gone.”

He opened the screen door, watching the two women face off in the kitchen. Charlotte took one look at him and excused herself.

“I’m here. The clock is ticking.”

“In more ways than you could know.” She brushed past him, taking her backpack with her. She knew he watched her walk to the living room television, his temper starting to flair with the odd snort-like sound he made.

“I’ve seen it before. I refuse to watch.”

With all the force she could muster, which was a lot considering her anger, she pushed him down onto the sofa. “Sit down and shut up. It’s my half hour.”

He watched with annoyance as she put in the first disc. Standing to the side, she let it run, showing her laughing with several people, holding a glass with what appeared to be wine in it.

“I refuse to sit here and watch.”

“Shut up, Chance. Open your eyes. It’s important.” Reluctantly, he watched the movie. After the first few minutes, she fast-forwarded it, making the screen blur in front of them. She slowed it when her second scene was due, showing her dancing and laughing with a group of six others in the middle of the small loft living room. She let the film run to the end, and popped it out of the machine. “Disc A.” She took a second disc from her bag, careful to show him the envelope it came in. “Disc B.” She pushed play, and they watched the same few minutes of film. She paused it when she knew what was coming. “I have fourteen minutes left. Shut up and watch.”

Turning the movie back on, she let him watch several minutes of the woman performing on screen. “I don’t have implants. This woman obviously does.” Then she fast-forwarded it to the spot she knew would exonerate her completely. Slowing it, she let him see the complete nude back of the girl performing. That’s where she chose to pause the tape, on the scroll work tattoo of her lower back. Someone had tried to conceal it, blurred those images, but the shadow was obvious on screen.

“You still don’t get it.” She shook her head and went back to her bag. Pulling a white envelope from it, she handed Chance the mailing envelope along with the white card. It took him a moment, for he was giving her his bored, poor-me face. Biting back her temper, she drew the letter from its envelope and opened it, placing it on the coffee table before him, next to the writing on the video’s mailing envelope. It was the same scratchy handwriting.

“You didn’t need to hire security for the vineyard, Chance. You should have hired it for our private lives.” The sadness in her voice wasn’t lost on either of them in different ways. His eyes snapped up to look at her.

“I don’t understand.”

She finally had his attention, and apparently, his mind couldn’t wrap around the information she was giving him.

“Of course not. I’ll remind you.” She pulled up the tee shirt she was wearing, turning her back. “See, no tattoo, no tramp stamp.” Dropping her shirt, she went to him. “See, the same handwriting, Scott’s handwriting.”

Anna drew back from him. The closeness made her want to stroke his face, to kiss the lips that she had missed so much in the past weeks. “I have three minutes left, so I’ll say what I came to say.”

He watched as she stood to her full height, taking several deep breaths while tucking her shirt back in. “Chance Walker, I have never been so disappointed with anyone in my life. How could you say you loved me, and think that I could do something like this and not tell

you before we became involved? I trusted you and you betrayed that trust. You accepted the worst about me without pausing to think or ask that there might have been another answer. You're just as bad as Scott, only he has the decency to be a snake all the time."

She drew a deep breath before continuing. "As an artist, if I was going to permanently mark my body, don't you think I would have been more creative, for God sakes, scrollwork? And while I refuse to show you, you know first-hand I don't have breast implants." Pausing, she gathered her backpack and headed for the door. "I thought you were different, that you were the one. I should thank Scott for showing me how wrong I was." She let the screen door close lightly, turning back, watching his face obscured by the metal screening. "I truly loved you, Chance. With everything I ever imagined love could hold. I trusted you without question, never realizing you were holding back on me. I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life with you, loving you, only you, and hopefully one day our family. I still can't truly believe how much this hurts."

Anna pulled herself up and breathed back the rest of her statement. Her formal social persona overtook her, and she straightened her shoulders. Her emotions were on overload with him so close, the setting so familiar and comfortable at one time in her life. She was afraid how much more she might have said. "It's your loss, Chance." Forcing herself to walk calmly to the rental car when she really wanted to run to its safety, dignity prevailed. When she reached it, Chance was just coming out of the front door, the envelope and letter in hand.

He waved, but she spun the car in a circle, creating a dust storm around him before she sped down the road to the main highway that would take her back to the airport for her flight home.

Safely on board, she finally began to breathe again once the plane left the ground. That was when she realized she'd never invited him inside her studio. While he'd seen some of her work, Anna had never

invited him into her private world. She, too, was guilty of holding something back from him.

Where do I go from here? she wondered as the taxi let her off in front of her apartment building. Gus opened the door, nodding as she wished him a good evening.

Chapter Twelve

Louis was waiting at Mario's that evening. She had taken the time to nap, shower, and change before going to meet him. Over a glass of wine, she gave him the canned version of her trip.

"You didn't give him a chance to talk, to let it all sink in." His statement gave her a start.

"Who's side are you on?" she teased. "I gave him exactly what he allowed me. Time to be startled and shocked, then I walked away."

"You miss him?"

"Of course, I do. But that's beside the point." She sighed heavily. "Louis, how could I have been so wrong, again?"

"I don't think you were wrong about Chance, but you have to admit the two of you have a habit of...hit and run...so to speak. He dropped a bomb in your lap, and ran. You've done the same thing, dropped your evidence and run."

"I didn't run. I simply came home."

"Does it still feel like home, Anna?" He watched her blink back tears as he reached for her hand. "You seemed so alive and happy when you two were together."

"How can we be together when he thinks I'm capable of doing something like that and then lying about it? If I had done this, I would have told him before we became intimate. What I thought was trust was simple infatuation. It's over now. If and when I run into him again, I'll be polite, like I was taught, and remove myself from his presence and go my own way."

"What if he comes to you?"

“It still doesn’t change anything. He never gave me a chance to clear myself. He believed what was easy to believe. Life’s too hard to be with someone who you’re always afraid of offending.” She sipped the wine, choosing to change to water. “Hell, what a mess. What bothers me the most is that, ultimately, Scott still wins in the end.”

“April has him on a short leash.”

“The better to squirm on.” She laughed, allaying Louis’ fears of her depression. “I’ll be all right. It will just take some time. Have I told you of my new assignment?”

* * * *

Chance paced the lobby in Louis Jennings’ building. The doorman had watched with a critical eye when he was told he would wait. And that he did, over two hours before he saw the limo pull up. He dug down deep to find the clarity he had reached earlier in the day.

“Louis, good evening.”

“Chance.” They both looked at the man standing several feet behind them. “Come up for a drink.” It was an order, not a question. They were silent until the elevator released them on Louis’ floor. He followed behind him as he unlocked the door and went about turning on lights.

“Wine?”

“Something stronger please.” Louis filled two glasses with the dark amber liquid, pausing to drop a single ice cube in each before handing one to Chance. He motioned for him to have a seat, noting he waited until Louis had done just that. They sat quietly for a while, Chance draining his glass in two gulps. He nodded to the bar, Louis only waving his hand in approval. When he returned the second time, the glass was half-full.

“Is she all right?”

“What do you think?”

"I think I'm an idiot." He put the glass down with a little too much force. "I think that in all the rest of my days, I'll never understand how I could be so stupid." He stood, pacing between the hallway and the living room. "Louis, I never gave her a chance to explain or even to defend herself. I went in like a bull and charged around."

"Your ego was bruised."

"Damn my ego, I should have known better. I should have trusted her when she seemed so confused."

"Why are you here telling me this instead of her?"

"I didn't want to make a scene at her building if Gus wouldn't let me up. As it is, your doorman already thinks I'm unstable."

Louis only laughed. "Yes, he probably does." Again they were quiet, until Louis asked the fatal question. "What do you expect from me, Chance?"

"I'm not sure. I needed to know she was all right. I need to know how to fix this." He sat heavily in the chair, lifted the glass to his mouth, and then put it back down.

"Come, I'll put on some coffee. Maybe we can figure something out." For the first time since he arrived back in New York, Chance saw a glimmer of hope for his future.

The two men sat side by side at the small counter in the galley kitchen, waiting for the coffee to drip through the filter. Its aroma filled the air around them.

"Why the beard?"

Chance laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "One less thing to deal with. Shaving didn't seem to matter anymore."

"I'll assume it's the same with your haircut, or rather the lack of it." Again, Chance only shook his head.

"I've been spending more time at the ranch. It doesn't matter there."

"What about the winery?" He watched Chance stiffen at the mention of it.

"I haven't been spending much time there."

“But this is your season. Oh, I get it, too many memories. What does the rest of your family think of all this?”

“They just knew we weren’t together, until your visit with Sally. She fessed up when I called earlier. She also said Anna had asked her for twenty-four hours before she told me she gave her the movie.”

“Is she in trouble for giving it to us?”

“No. She’s in trouble for not kicking me in the butt when she realized what had happened.” He held up his hand. “In all fairness, she’s been part of our family for years. You couldn’t expect her to... How was she supposed to know that Anna didn’t have a tattoo?”

“You knew, and you knew Anna hadn’t enhanced her breasts.”

“I didn’t watch the whole tape, only the first few minutes before I lost my senses. I wasn’t particularly looking for implants.”

“What do King and Charlotte have to say about it?” Chance got up to fill their cups, replacing the glass pot carefully back on the warmer plate.

“Until Anna showed up yesterday, they only knew we were apart. I didn’t tell them why.”

“And now?”

“Hell, Charlotte had my bag packed before she saw the second tape and King was booting me in the butt for being such a jerk. He had the plane waiting before I could change clothes.”

“I see.”

“Louis, I love her. It has to be love because nothing else could hurt this badly.”

“Seems to me you have to do something about it then.”

“Exactly, I just don’t know what.”

“Let’s leave that for a moment. What do you plan on doing about Scott?”

“I’ve had several very vivid scenarios go through my head, each of them ending with his eyes bulging from my hands closing around his neck.”

“Yes, well, I’ve been there too. I tend to think there’s got to be a better way.”

“The only way that counts is the one that brings Ileanna back to me.” He hesitated before going on, then drew a breath, and continued. “It does get worse, Louis, and I have to tell you and Anna I’ve seen it before.” He sat back as the anguish washed over his face.

“What are you talking about?” Louis was confused at his confession.

“The film, the original, I’ve seen it.” Chance stood, choosing to face Louis across the counter. “When I was flying in this afternoon, I realized I had seen the original movie.” His fist pounded the counter, but the look on Louis’ face made him continue. “When I was in law school here, Will and I went to a showing of some of the film school projects. I saw this film, in the original form. That’s why Anna’s always looked so familiar to me. I’ve been carrying her image in my head for ten years.” His head fell into his hands, his thumbs rubbing his temples.

* * * *

There were no messages on her machine when she returned from supper with Louis. Anna was relieved and disappointed at the same time. She took a long bath, remembering the times she had shared it with Chance, then suddenly drained the water. She tossed on her painting shirt and went to the studio. Work was the only thing she could lose herself in, so she chose to work through the night.

The shrill ringing of the phone woke her the next morning. She had fallen asleep at the table, again. Grabbing for the receiver, if only to make the noise stop, she all but whispered into the phone, “Hello?” She was groggy, trying to stretch while holding the phone to her ear.

“Please don’t hang up.” The voice forced her mind to clear.

“What is it?”

“I woke you.”

“You called and woke me to tell me that?” It was so easy to fall back into old patterns of teasing.

“No. I called to ask you to see me, meet me for a drink, whatever you choose.”

She took some time to think over his invitation, deciding she wanted one face-to-face meeting before walking away from him forever.

“I’ll meet you. Your office. This afternoon?”

“Any time you want?”

“Two o’clock.” She pushed the off button, knowing it was better to get this first meeting out of the way than push it off. Eventually they’d run into each other in public and she wanted to get this out of the way. Hopefully, in the future they’d be polite, almost strangers who would nod and go to separate neutral corners.

Chapter Thirteen

She hesitated in the doorway and took a deep breath when she first saw him. Chance was waiting, his desk cluttered with work. His office door was open, the reception area empty when she arrived. She noted he hadn't shaved but had gotten a haircut and his beard trimmed. He was in his usual jeans and work shirt. Anna's throat started to close as she watched him pace from the doorway. How could she love him so much when he was such an idiot? Shaking her head, she was smiling when he turned and saw her waiting.

The dark circles under her eyes were camouflaged with makeup. She was wearing much more than she usually did, trying to mask them, hoping he wouldn't acknowledge her haggard appearance. He waited until she entered the office, motioning to sit on the leather sofa in the corner. He watched her hesitate for a moment before she finally went and sat, straight and prim, afraid any deviation would crumble the façade she was forcing.

She had on a peach-colored linen sheath, simple and plain, with strappy sandals. She wanted to touch him, to reach out to him, but couldn't bring herself to raise her arm. It hung like dead weight against her this side.

"Thank you for seeing me," he said, his voice hesitant.

"You're welcome." She was biting the inside of her lip, watching him. "No candy and flowers?" She was teasing him like nothing had happened, hoping to hide how much she hurt inside.

"Anything you want to make this better."

"You can't give me what you don't have."

"I'll get it," he started, realizing what she meant. "No, you're right. I can't give you back the last weeks. I can't give you back the innocence I took from you."

She laughed aloud. "I wasn't innocent before, Chance. Maybe naive when it came to you, but not innocent." She laid her purse on the burl wood table next to the sofa, and stood. "I've been thinking." Again she laughed, shaking her head. "Thinking about nothing else. You hurt me beyond anything Scott ever did or said to me. And what's worse, we let him come between us."

"Anna." Chance crossed from the window. She chose to take a step back from his outstretched arms. He dropped them to his sides, stricken with her movements.

"Why didn't you just believe me in the beginning? I asked you to walk away then!"

"I couldn't. I still can't."

"You have to. There's no other alternative." She crossed in front of him, sitting on the shelf that ran the length of the windows. "Where's your secretary this afternoon?"

"I sent her on a fool's errand. I didn't want anything to interrupt us. Would you like something to drink, lunch maybe?"

"No thanks. Let's just get this over with. First, what do King and Charlotte think about all this?"

"Until you showed up at the ranch, they only knew we weren't together."

"And now?"

"They know the truth. Sally backed you up."

"I never meant to put her in a bad position."

"It's all right. If she had kicked me sooner, we might be having a different conversation."

Anna went to him, placing her hands against his chest, feeling his warmth radiate through her hands. She searched his face, taking in his new look with the beard. Without thinking, she reached out to touch

his cheek, feeling him tense when she did. Pulling back quickly, she turned from him.

“And Lottie?”

“Just the basics, a video was re-edited, I jumped to the wrong conclusion.” He waited for her to turn back, but she didn’t. “She thinks I should throw myself at your feet and ask for forgiveness.”

“And you?” This time she did turn a smile on her lips.

“Would it help?”

“No. But thank her anyway for me.” Slowly she headed to the corner, taking her purse from the table.

“Ileanna, I really am sorry. I was wrong. I wish you would tell me how to fix this.”

“This?”

“Us.”

“Oh.” She walked to the door, turning back to him. “I’ll ask you for just one thing.” Chance watched her fidget with the clasp on her purse before she spoke. “Margie and Will’s wedding is in two weeks. Is it possible for us to be a united front for a day, for them?”

“Of course, I had thought I just wouldn’t go, but I think your way is better.”

“Because?”

“Because I don’t want to give Scott Armstrong the satisfaction of seeing you there alone.”

“Thank you.”

“Anna, can I see you before then?”

“No, I’d prefer not. Let’s just go to the wedding together. By the time they get back from their honeymoon, we’ll just not be a couple anymore.”

“I’m not happy with the arrangement, but if it’s what you really want, I’ll wait to see you for the wedding.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you two weeks from Saturday.”

“I’ll pick you up.”

She hesitated, nodding. “Bye, Chance.” She left quickly, knowing that if she stayed longer, he might talk her into staying forever.

* * * *

Sparkling light sliced through the glass panel she stood before. A thick slab of glass, eventually it was to wind up as the insert for the main entrance of the tasting room at the winery. The glass was specially ordered for both height and width, along with the thickness. Anna needed to be able to etch the glass evenly to give it depth. The basic idea was sketched on the glass in special pencil and detailed stencils, while several drawings of the finished image hung around the room. The far end of the studio was curtained off from the rest in an attempt to keep the sand-blasting dust to a minimum. The air compressor chugged in the background, replenishing its air intake, Anna again thankful she’d soundproofed the studio during the renovation.

Anna stepped back, checking her work with a critical eye. She had always joked that a small piece of her went into every piece and that was why she didn’t want to do them anymore. This was different. She viewed it as a cathartic process. He’d been on her mind almost every waking moment, and worse, in her dreams too. Hoping that this would excise him from her, she remembered it was a gift, and that made it special in its own right as art.

Charlotte had told her Chance had been impressed with the doors in her apartment and wondered how he could get her to do one for him. Anna teased it might serve him right if she did, as long as she got to choose the subject matter. Both women had a quick laugh over it, and the subject was dropped. Shortly after, Charlotte asked Anna if she would reproduce the gate and vine logo from their label for the front door of the tasting room as a gift from Charlotte and King when the label went national. She had hesitantly agreed, making sure she knew that it wouldn’t be done in the short two months before the

promotion began. Charlotte said she would be happy whenever it got done, just that she thought he would like it.

Wrestling with her conscience didn't happen. In her heart, she knew she would do this panel for Chance. Whatever he chose to do with it, now that their circumstances had changed, she didn't care. It would be a labor of lost love and hopefully a new beginning.

So here she stood, reshaping the logo to fit its medium. Her neck ached and her lower back was on fire, but she worked possessed. It would come in waves, her energy and ideas, the inability to walk away from the piece. It stayed with her day and night. Louis had taken to calling her several times before she was due to see him, just to make sure she wouldn't forget.

* * * *

Chance was nervous. His hands shook as he tried to fix his tie. Finally, he gave up, folded it, and stuffed it in his jacket pocket. He undid the top two buttons of his shirt and walked from his room. Lottie let out one of her slow wolf whistles, acknowledging his appearance.

"Are you excited that you're going to get to see Anna?" she asked. Her question wasn't malicious or taunting. He saw excitement and romance in her eyes.

"Yes, I'll see Anna." He cleared his throat. Sally walked in as he did, having listened to the conversation from the dining room where she stood folding towels.

"More than likely, he's sick to his stomach." He wasn't sure how she knew, but she was right. He hadn't felt this bad since the day he first saw the movie. When she walked from the ranch wasn't great either, he thought to himself.

"Good-night, ladies, enjoy your movie." He winked to Lottie. "Don't wait up for me," he reinforced, and left the two women laughing, speculating over how his evening would go.

Gus surprised him when he arrived. "Ms. Jennings said you should go right up, Mr. Walker. Big day today." Chance stopped dead, reaching to push the elevator button, glancing over his shoulder at Gus. "The wedding, Ms. Margie's, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course."

He nodded, never so thankful to be able to escape into the elevator. His palms were clammy. He rubbed them against his pant legs just before he knocked on her door. Only a moment later, it swung open.

* * * *

Ileanna garnered a deep breath and went to let Chance in. She was fixing her earring in place as she got her first glimpse of him. His dark suit and starched white shirt with the top buttons open all but made her swoon. He had kept the beard, though it was still trimmed. She wanted to reach to it, to feel the softness between her fingers, but knew she wouldn't.

"I'm almost ready. Come in. Would you like a drink?" Closing the door behind him, he followed her into the living room. "Help yourself. I'll just be a minute more." She felt his gaze as she walked away, the silvery green dinner suit hugging her hips with each step. She returned carrying a pair of strappy sandals with long thin heels.

"Are you all right, Chance?" He shook himself from his thoughts, realizing she was talking to him. "Maybe you do need a drink before we go," she teased, brushing past him to go to the bar. "What would you like?"

"Nothing. I don't need a drink to spend time with you." His statement rocked her.

"I wasn't suggesting..." She poured sparkling water into a glass and handed it to him. "If you'd rather not do this, I'll understand." This time she waited him out, not blinking from his look. "Louis will be there. I wouldn't be alone."

“No. I’m having trouble not taking you in my arms and kissing you until we work this out.” He set the glass down. “I’ll be fine. I just have to get my hormones in check.” His smile was soft. She returned it in kind. “I still don’t understand why you’re not her maid of honor, Anna.”

“Because, it would have started a whole commotion with April being her blood cousin and me just a friend. Having William’s sister avoided all that mess.”

“Maybe the bride realized you’d outshine her at the altar?” She blushed on cue, starting to primp her curls, something she only did when nervous or distracted. She could see it in his eyes, the same forlorn look hers carried. She still loved him, but couldn’t accept his past behavior.

The air around them became hot and heady, sensual and needy. They both silently acknowledged the impulse to pull the other to them and instinctively went to neutral corners.

“Just think, a few months ago you didn’t know I existed.” Her words trailed off as she left him. “I’m ready, Chance.” He seemed lost in thought, maybe of their first night together, there on the couch, or on the floor over here, she wondered.

Laughter wasn’t what she expected, but what she got. She gave him a questioning look when he motioned to her purse. It resembled the top layer of a miniature wedding cake, decorated in beads that matched her suit.

“I have a friend who makes them. They’re quite collectible.” She trailed off, knowing the fashion statement would be lost on him. She cringed inwardly when she realized how her priorities had changed since knowing him. Collecting purses was no substitute for his touch.

Gus buzzed up, interrupting them. “Mr. Jennings has arrived.”

“Thank you, we’re on our way.” She turned to Chance. “One last chance at backing out, take it or leave it?”

“Let’s not keep Louis waiting. I’m sure he’s not happy about this situation.” They both paused, neither averting the other’s intense gaze. Finally, Anna pulled herself together.

“Any other train wrecks...” she said, remembering the night of Margie and Will’s party. She refrained from turning in a slow circle in front of him, but caught him trying to pull back a smile.

“Tonight, I’m the wreck,” he told her, and she knew he meant it on several levels.

All she had to do was get through the next few hours. Then she would finish the door and head up to Newport for the fall. It had come to her a few nights ago she wasn’t tied to the city. She could take her next project with her to the beach house and work there. Reminding herself, she made a mental note to tell Louis about her plans to leave the city for a few weeks.

Both men made a point of being cordial to each other. Chance had no reason not to be. Louis had been nothing but kind and understanding toward him. Anna knew Louis was just glad they were in the same small space together. He’d told her a few days before if he could just get them in the same place for a while, things might resolve themselves.

“You look lovely, my dear,” Louis said as they were seated in the back of the car with him.

“Thank you, Grandfather.” She kissed his cheek. “I’m afraid Chance doesn’t get the purse,” she teased.

“Hell, that woman spends all this time and energy on making purses that only hold a key and a lipstick. Think what she might do if she put her mind to it.” Chance leaned back against the soft leather seat, listening to them banter back and forth. Anna remembered clearly when he would have added his opinion.

“How many are we for this little party today?”

Anna laughed. “Only about half as many as the engagement party. That was mostly for business reasons, especially since they were getting married so soon. Today should be about family and friends.”

Anna's stomach lurched with anxiety as they waited their turn in line before the stone church.

It was over quickly. Their ceremony kept to vows and promises. Then it was off to the hotel for the party. This time, they chose to walk the three blocks between the two buildings. It was a beautiful summer evening, a day every bride deserves. Anna made a point of sitting between Louis and Chance during the service and even more of a point of staring straight ahead during it. She had tried to hold back her tears, but a few stragglers escaped down her cheek. There was no question that Chance had been watching her instead of the couple as he slipped her a pressed white handkerchief. She only nodded. She refused to turn and meet his eyes. She would be lost in the silver clouds if she did.

The banquet room was beautiful. The same room they had used for their engagement party, but now it was set for a formal sit-down dinner. It had been lavishly decorated with candles and flowers. The receiving line went amazing well. Margie chose to focus on Chance's new beard while Anna reassured the bride she had accomplished everything she set out to in planning the wedding, including the dress. Seated at their table, Louis leaned behind Anna.

"Have you decided how you're going to handle Scott?" Chance nodded.

"If it's all right with Anna, nothing has happened. I never received the movie. We never had a...falling out." Chance looked to Anna, and she nodded her approval. "That will drive him crazy. He'll be expecting some type of retaliation."

"Exactly, we smile and keep our united front."

"Anna, does Margie or Will know anything?" Louis inquired.

"No." She said a little too loudly, laughing to cover her outburst. "I didn't want to ruin their day."

"Heads up," Chance added as he spotted Scott and April approaching their table. "Isn't the bride the only one who's supposed

to wear white?" he whispered to Anna. She smiled at his comment, for her own pleasure, not for show.

"Good evening, all, nice to see you again." Scott had his carefree voice on for April. She hung on his arm as if they'd been surgically attached. As they took their seats across the table, Chance groaned. Anna decided it was going to be a long night.

As the happy couple was announced into the party, everyone stood, applauding their entrance. After their first dance, everyone was encouraged to join them on the dance floor. Chance was standing before Anna could think, his hand extended.

"Shall we?"

"Yes, of course. Grandfather, will you excuse us?" She took Chance's hand as Louis told her he was going to the bar with Ben. On the dance floor, she was rigid in his arms.

"You've got to do better than that if you expect him to buy this whole charade." His words filtered through her, and she let him pull her closer to his body in the circle of his arms.

The rest of the evening was marked off by the changing courses of food placed in front of them. Both Anna and Chance seemed to push it around their plates more than eat it. Anna and Louis noted Chance stiffened in his seat when Scott asked if anyone had seen any good movies lately. He answered back he and Anna spent most evenings at home. Scott stiffened at that. Anna had to bite back a laugh, while Louis asked her to dance, efficiently taking her away from the situation. At that point, Chance asked April to join him for the waltz that was playing.

As they were enjoying the wedding cake with coffee, Scott had tried to goad them once again. This time he asked Chance for his address, saying he was having his staff update his book for the coming holiday season. Anna was amazed at Chance's swift answer of, "just send anything care of Anna from now on."

She took his hand, clasping it while she finally let herself have one long look at him. After that, Anna had gone to help Margie

change clothes. They were leaving for their honeymoon trip that night, taking a private flight up the cape. They would be there before midnight to start their vacation. Once the bride and groom left, it was a simple matter of a few good-byes and they would be done. They could each go home and hopefully leave this behind them. Waiting for Louis and Ben to finish their conversation, Scott approached Anna and Chance in the hallway outside the banquet room.

“So, still together, I see.”

“Why wouldn’t we be?” Anna asked sweetly. Scott didn’t answer, but she knew his mind was working overtime to figure out what had happened. He had gone to great lengths to get a copy of the film and have it edited.

Chance’s arm went around her waist, holding her close. She blended against him, wanting his touch, his warmth, and his strength. When Louis and Ben joined them, they were finally free to leave. Inside the limousine, Louis told the driver to take him home first, as he was closest. After he was let off, they went back to Anna’s. As they were about to get out, he held her back.

“I’m hungry, what about you?” Smiling in the dim light, she nodded.

Chance talked to the driver and they were off. After a quick stop at the deli, they went to his apartment.

“Are you sure it’s not too late?” Anna asked.

“Lottie and Sally will be home.” His answer came almost too quickly.

She also knew it was a way to stall, to keep her with him a little longer. He dismissed the driver once they were there, making it clear he would see Anna home.

“Are you sure about this, Chance?”

“You know every woman wants the details of every wedding and my descriptions lack color commentary, or so I’ve been told.” He had the key in the lock when she finally agreed.

Who was she kidding, she told herself. She wanted to be here or she would have left him once they reached her apartment. Anna wanted this last time with these women, figuring it would be closure of a sort.

Inside, he called to both the women. "I come bearing mass quantities of food. Come and get it."

Sally and Lottie both surfaced, tying robes around them. Anna was greeted with hugs, kisses, and questions.

"Into the dining room, she'll tell you all about it." After they had set out the food, Anna kicked off her shoes and dug into the half of turkey sandwich. Her animated descriptions made the ladies smile. The warmth of her voice almost broke her heart. In such a short time, she'd come to love these women and missed the relationships they were building.

After midnight, she asked to be taken home. Her yawn and stretch had preceded the request. She and Lottie searched for her other shoe as Sally inspected the cake purse, exclaiming the geniuses of the design. Chance only shook his head and laughed at all three of them.

"You're right, Anna, I'll just never get it."

"Anna, will we get to see you again, soon? I have a recital coming up just before I leave for Italy. It's two weeks after the winery party. It would be great if you'd come." Anna knew Chance watched how she chose to handle his little sister's request.

"I'm not sure if I'll be here. I'm heading up to Newport for a while. I have a new project to take with me." She paused, adding, "If I'm in the city, I'll be there." She hugged Lottie, then Sally before leaving.

In the taxi back to her building, they didn't talk. He had his arm across the back of the seat and Anna rested her head against it. There wasn't a question he wouldn't see her to her door. It was automatic. She let him in, as if nothing had shattered their lives. She flipped on switches as she kicked off her shoes. "Would you like a drink?" He caught the catch in her voice.

“No, I should go. Thank you for being kind to Lottie.”

“Why shouldn’t I be? She’s not a jerk.” The words came out in a rush. She lifted her hand to her mouth and finally laughed. “I was just being accurate. I do plan to head up in a few weeks. Louis still has a beach house there. I figured I could use some time away.”

“Oh, Ileanna.” He had her in his arms before either realized that he was going to touch her. She melted against his chest, her head to his shoulder. In the circle of his arms, all was right with the world. She let him hold her for a long while, and then she looked to him, making her choice, kissing his lips, lightly at first.

He was surprised, but he returned her kiss. Her hand ran along his cheek, and he pulled her closer, his hands automatically encircling her breasts. Her moan pushed him to kiss her deeper.

Anna pushed back from him, holding the back of her hand to her mouth. “I’m sorry, Chance. I didn’t mean to...”

“Is that good-bye?”

“I guess so.” He gave her one last lingering hug then kissed her lightly on the lips.

“Ileanna, you’ll never know how wrong I was not to trust you, to not even give you a chance to defend yourself.”

She pulled back sharply from him. “That’s just it, Chance. If you really loved me, defending myself wouldn’t have been an issue. You would have trusted me. You didn’t. I don’t know if you couldn’t or wouldn’t, but I can’t be with a man who looks to outsiders before turning to me. No matter how much I love you, it would never be enough.”

He shook his head, acknowledging her awareness. “I do love you, Anna, even if I don’t know how to show you.”

“I love you too, Chance. But without trust, we don’t have anything.” She walked him to the door, surprising him by giving him one last hug. “Take care of yourself, and Lottie, too.”

“You too.” He pulled back, looking her in the eye. “If you ever...you know how to reach me.” She nodded, but he stayed in her

arms. “I have one last question.” Anna nodded for him to continue. She stared, still holding on to him. “How come you never let me in the studio?”

“It never seemed important. You saw the illustrations for the last book.” She was hedging, and he raised one eyebrow in question.

“But you always brought them out to me. You never let me behind that nymph door. Why?” She pulled away, thinking about his question.

“I don’t know. It wasn’t conscious.”

“Wasn’t it? By keeping me out of the studio, you held on to the one sanctuary that you couldn’t share. You didn’t trust me enough to let me in.”

“I trusted you more than anyone else in my life, except for Louis.” She was bundled against him again and knew he felt her shudder as she put her arms around his neck.

“I’m sorry, Ileana. I never meant to hurt you.” He kissed her one last time, long and slow.

Anna accepted it, knowing it would have to last her a lifetime.

Chapter Fourteen

Satisfied the panel was cushioned properly, she nodded to Louis' driver as he and another man hefted the precious cargo onto a furniture dolly. She went down to the truck with them, helping them to prop the edges of the crate to keep it level for the trip to the winery. She had arranged with Louis to borrow his driver on a day she knew Charlotte and King were out east. The rental van was just one more phone call that was made. Chance was at the ranch and not expected back until just before the party.

Her bags were packed and waiting to be loaded into a taxi. She would take the short flight to Newport and hope the change of scenery would somehow give her the inspiration she was lacking to start the new illustrations.

* * * *

Chance was obviously not happy when he arrived and found the front of the tasting room covered with brown paper. Charlotte managed to make him wait until Lottie got home before allowing him to see his present. Once they were all assembled, King made them wait longer while he slipped inside through a side door and turned on the interior lights. He knew the light shining through the intricate design would bring it to life, especially at the twilight hour.

Both King and Charlotte had been shocked when Anna had called to arrange for delivering the door. She explained how she had it re-framed and about the delivery. Charlotte hadn't been able to hold back her thoughts on the phone.

“We just assumed that you wouldn’t continue. I mean, once you and Chance broke up, we just didn’t know. Besides, you said it wouldn’t be ready in time. How did you manage it?” She had listened to Anna’s quick explanation of being inspired and needing to get started on another project. She wasn’t prepared for the work of art that arrived a few days earlier. It had all but torn her up watching the workmen hang the new door. Relief finally washed over her as they tested it, knowing it was hung properly, balanced, and smooth. As promised, she phoned Anna and told her it had arrived intact and now proudly hung in its place.

“Go ahead, Chance,” Lottie prodded. She knew what was hidden by the paper. Quite unceremoniously, he tore the paper, revealing a corner of the panel. He stood, shocked at what he saw and what he hoped he might find next. Tearing at the rest of it, he stood mesmerized by the gate carved into the glass, the rows of vines running into infinity behind it. The simplicity and depth brought tears to his eyes. He didn’t try to hide them. He let them flow freely. Sally handed him a tissue while he rubbed his fingers over the inside of the panel.

“How?”

“We asked her to do something before the breakup,” Charlotte began. “When we didn’t hear from her, we figured she decided against it. Then last week, she called, said it was ready to be delivered.”

“I can’t believe it.” He took several steps back from the door, watching the light play off the design. “It’s beautiful. I’m an idiot.”

“Yes, son, we know. Now what are you going to do about it?”

“I’m not sure. I just don’t know what to do.”

* * * *

Anna stood in the back corner of the recital hall, listening to Lottie perform her solo. She had timed her arrival just as the house lights

were going down. She caught a glimpse of Charlotte in the third row, seated between King and Chance. Sally was in the fourth seat. A family united, she thought, sighing to herself. When Lottie's portion of the program was complete, she slipped out, stopping backstage to drop off a package for her.

Walking for several blocks, she let the warm September air dry the tears that she seemed unable to control. The music had moved her, Lottie's talent overwhelming. Most of all, seeing Chance, every emotion surfaced, even if it was just a glimpse. He sat upright, his shoulders proud. He was the first to stand to applaud her when she finished her solo, tossing several long stemmed roses onto the stage. That was when Anna realized her tears were coming, and she knew she couldn't hold them back.

The apartment still seemed stuffy, even with the windows open. She had only returned that afternoon, her bags still packed on the bench at the foot of her bed. Her first priority was to get the studio back in order. Dropping her jacket on the living room couch as she went past, she set about unpacking the cartons she had shipped back last week. Knowing she wouldn't rest until this was done, she phoned for a pizza to be delivered.

It felt strange to be there, in the same space that she and Chance had spent time in together. Opening a bottle of his Chablis, she stared at the couch where he had first taken her, the carpet where she had taken him. Everywhere she looked there was a reminder of him. A doorway he stood in, the bar where he poured their wine, the glass window he stood before, his shoulders hunched in anger and resentment.

Newport had done her some good, the short time she spent there. She had planned to be away for a few months, but after the end of the first week, she knew she couldn't work there. She had shipped the art supplies back and resigned herself to a week off. Flying back this morning, she was relieved and anxious at the same time. The sooner

she faced the apartment and its memories, the sooner she hoped to be able to get back to work.

* * * *

Chance sent King and Charlotte ahead to the restaurant. He and Sally waited while Lottie changed her clothes and said her good-byes. She would be leaving in two short days for Italy, a new challenge in her young life. A chance to study with a great soprano, retired from the stage. He had mixed emotions about her going. The fact that it was the chance of a lifetime summed it up, but he knew he was going to miss her. With Lottie in Italy, Sally would go back to the house at the vineyard while King and Charlotte would head back to the ranch. Ultimately, he would be left alone when he was at the New York apartment, and he wasn't looking forward to it.

Seated at a large table in Lottie's favorite restaurant, she gave them all the run down on her mistakes and missed notes. They all agreed that her performance had been a disaster, how would they ever show their faces again? Through the laughter, he watched Sally hold back tears several times while Charlotte openly wept just before her coffee was served. He noted the small package she had placed on the table, and he used it to change the subject.

"It was waiting for me backstage when I finished. The stage manager said a beautiful woman dropped it off." She held the small box, feeling its weight. "I don't have any idea."

Lottie set about pulling off the ribbons and freeing the wrapping. Inside was a coin, nestled on top of a note. She paused to look at the coin. It was Italian. "A penny," she said, correcting it quickly, "lira." Then she looked at the card. Everyone at the table was silent while she read it, passing the coin to each other in turn. Looking up, she passed the note to Charlotte, who read it aloud.

“Dear Lottie, My grandmother, Eddie, gave me this coin as a good luck charm the first time I traveled abroad on my own. I hope it brings you the same luck it brought me—the ability to make wise choices, to see the beauty around you, and to enjoy the time to its fullest. I wish you much happiness and success, Ileanna.”

Charlotte handed the card to King, who passed it to Chance. He read it again, slowly, hearing her say the words in his mind, her smooth voice speaking as if she were sitting next to him.

“She was there, tonight. She had to have been. The stage manager said it was dropped off just after my solo.”

“The woman amazes me,” King whispered to Charlotte. She nodded her agreement, squeezing his hand. “Chance, what are you thinking?”

“I’m not sure what to think.”

“I think if she was here tonight, she’s probably still in the city. Would you run me by on the way home, Chance? I’d like to be able to say thank you, and good-bye.”

“I’m not sure, Lottie. It’s going to be pretty late.” Chance watched as she challenged him with her eye.

Sally nodded to Charlotte and they both enjoyed the laugh as brother and sister battled not to blink.

“It might be the last chance you have before you leave. Even a few minutes is better than nothing, time for a hug and a thank you.” Sally had given her opinion, while King chose to intercede.

“Why don’t I take Lottie over while you escort the ladies back to the apartment?” He didn’t leave anyone much time to think about it. He signaled for the waiter, kissed Charlotte on the cheek, and took Lottie’s hand.

“I’ll leave the car for you. We’ll take a cab. We won’t be late.” Chance watched as the two disappeared from the restaurant before he had time to think what had happened.

“I’m ready, Chance. Do you want more coffee?”

“No, let’s go home.”

He didn’t say another word until they were home. He disappeared into the office until he heard King and Lottie come in. He poured himself a brandy before wandering into the living room as they talked with Charlotte.

“You should see her apartment. There’s two doors there, just like Chance said. One’s a tree and the other a nymph. Oh, Mom, you should see them.”

“Is she...all right?” Chance bit his lip, annoyed he had asked the question aloud.

“Yes, I guess so. She seemed quite tired, she said from her trip. She just came back from Newport this morning.”

“Her hair’s different, longer,” King added. Charlotte lifted an eyebrow at his observation. He shrugged his shoulder as Chance turned to stare out the window.

He waited until they were settled in for the night and the apartment was quiet before he left.

Later he tossed and turned most of the night. He was up before five, running in the park, running to forget, running to run for the simple exhaustion of it. He was in the office before eight, had cleared most of his desk by eleven, and found he didn’t know what to do with himself for the afternoon.

* * * *

Anna assumed it was her pizza delivery when Gus called up. Not really listening to him, she went in search of her purse. When the knock came, she opened the door to find her pizza, along with King and Lottie Walker. She had been surprised to say the least, stumbling over her words as she paid for the delivery and invited them inside.

“Oh, Anna, it’s beautiful. I love the coin, and I’ll treasure it always.” Lottie hugged her with great strength, no hesitancy evident in the casual contact. “I’m so excited about going.”

“And maybe just a little nervous?” Anna asked with a smile. Lottie glanced back to King, then slowly smiled too.

“Maybe just a little.” The two of them laughed as she ushered them into the living room.

“Can I get you a drink, King?”

“No, thank you, Anna. I was appreciating your view.”

“I missed this place. The last few weeks at the beach were great, but Lottie you were wonderful tonight. I was so happy my flight was on time. I got there just before your solo.”

* * * *

King walked to the glass wall, watching Central Park beneath him. The two women talked on in the background. He noted she was pale, certainly not rested, that was for sure. Tormented was more like it. The dark circles under her eyes told him she wasn't taking care of herself. Now his dilemma presented itself. He had insinuated himself into the situation by bringing Lottie by tonight on purpose. King knew he had liked Anna when he met her, but after the split, he didn't like what he saw in Chance. After hearing the circumstances that broke them apart, he had been surprised his first thoughts were to help Anna.

Knowing that Chance was in love with her, what was he supposed to do? He half hoped that she would have been rude or with someone when they stopped by unannounced. Finding her alone with the sadness she had tried to cover had gone directly to his gut.

Louis? I wonder? he thought. Maybe tomorrow he would make a call. After all, they had spent time together over the summer, and King had enjoyed his company. Might Louis be able to give him some advice or at least a different perspective where Chance and Anna were concerned?

“Keep a healthy outlook, and you’ll do great. Just remember, you can have fun studying something you like to do. It’s not against the law,” Anna was saying as they walked back into the room.

“Dad, you should see the nymph door Anna has on her workroom. It’s incredible.”

“Well, may I see it, then?” Lottie half pulled him into the hallway, pointing out the way the light shone through, the graceful line of her cheek, her hand.

* * * *

They had only stayed a short time, yet as she closed and locked the door, Anna felt more alone than ever before. She had started to forget what it was like to be around them and the energy they brought with them.

“Stop feeling sorry for yourself,” she berated, then headed back to the studio to finish unpacking. Her pizza sat in the box on the kitchen counter, coagulating. She sipped at a glass of wine while organizing the drawings she had started at the beach. When Gus buzzed up, she was surprised. “Yes?”

“Sorry to bother you so late, Ms. Jennings. Mr. Walker asked if you might have time for a quick cup of coffee.”

“Of course, please ask him to come up. Thank you, Gus. Good night.”

“Night, Miss.”

* * * *

Anna was annoyed with herself for giving in so easily, but she didn’t want to leave any doubt in Gus’s mind. She stopped in the hallway to check her makeup, wishing she’d had some notice of his visit. Running her hand through the top of her hair, she made a mental note to call for an appointment. She had missed her usual trim to

spend the week with Chance at the ranch, and then things had just spiraled out of control. A hair appointment was the last thing on her mind. Hearing his knock, she took a deep breath, brushing the front of her gray slacks, tucking in her pale pink shirt.

“Hi.”

“Hi. Come in. You just missed King and Lottie by a little while.”

He kissed her softly then took what he had come for. His demands on her mouth were met with sheer defiance. She wouldn’t be the first one to back away. It only drove him to kiss her harder. Her hands had gone to his chest, her palms flat against him. She could feel the warmth through the layer of cloth that separated them. When she could take no more, she finally pulled back, stepping inside, shutting the door behind her.

“May I come in?”

His voice was somehow sarcastic to her ears, but she didn’t want to be judgmental. She also didn’t want him to think she was a pushover and he could treat her this way.

“If you can control yourself, yes.” She scanned his face with her critical eye. “Come in. I was just having a glass of wine. Would you like one?” She walked around behind the bar, putting its width as a barrier between them.

“Yes, please.” He accepted the glass, automatically walking to the window, his back to her.

“I came to thank you for being so nice to Lottie.”

“I told you before she’s not a jerk, why shouldn’t I be nice to her.” She tried to hide the smirk that formed on her lips, biting the inside of her cheek.

“Don’t make fun of me, Anna. This is important.”

“I agree, but after all the time we spent together, you still never realized I do that when I’m nervous?” He turned quickly, placing his glass on the coffee table as he passed it.

“Of course, I do. I know just before you really start to laugh, you bite the inside of your lip. I know you use the sleeves of your work

shirts to hone the tips of your brushes. I know how you felt in my arms, sated after we had just made love. I know, Ileanna. That's the worst part. I know." His statement was said with such finality, such defeat.

"Chance, why are you here?"

"The door, Anna, how could you?"

"How could I not?" Her words were simple. Apparently, he never stopped to think of it that way. "King and Charlotte had spoken to me soon after we met, and then they brought it up when I was in Texas with you that second time. How could I refuse them?"

"You could have walked away, just not completed it."

"Not my style. You should know that by now."

"Yes, I should. I miss you, Anna."

"I miss you too, Chance. But it still doesn't change anything that's happened."

"It's the most beautiful thing I've seen you do, yet you gave it to King and Charlotte?"

"It was a present. They thought you would like it."

"What did you think?" She put down her glass and left the safety of the bar, deciding to sit at the far end of the sofa, away from the light, shielding her expressions from him as best as she could.

"I thought you would like it. I also figured you might be upset by it. I also didn't care at that point. I figured once I finished it, I could find a way to let you go."

"You once told me a little piece of your soul went into each piece you made. What piece did you give me, Anna?"

"I gave you everything I could—love, hate, anger, laughter, and eventually a small piece of my heart."

"I still don't know what to say. I behaved so badly, and then you go and do this. It's not fair, Ileanna. It just isn't. How am I supposed to repay you?"

"Repay me?" She automatically tossed a pillow from the sofa at his back. "You jerk." Now she was up, storming around the room,

roaming for something else to throw. “You stupid...do whatever you want with the door. I don’t care if you break it into a thousand pieces. I didn’t do it to be repaid. I did it because I loved you, and by finishing it, I hoped to understand why it didn’t work for us. I had hoped you’d understand that a small piece of me would always be with you.” She reached for a small porcelain figurine on the mantel, considered throwing it then replaced it. “I finished the piece for myself, mostly. To prove that I could still do it, that you didn’t defeat me in the one place I had left, my work.” She went to the kitchen, leaving him in the living room. She set about making coffee and was setting out cups on a tray when she noticed him standing in the doorway. “Would you like coffee?”

“Yes, please.” Quietly, she arranged the tray, which he carried back into the living room. She poured for them, taking her cup to the sofa with her. “What do you want from me, Chance?”

“I want you to forgive me, to let me back into your heart, to realize that I was an idiot and should have trusted you from the start.”

“You never gave me a moment to talk it through with you. If you had brought the disc with you, we would have known it was a fake as soon as she came on camera with implants.” She sipped, watching him over the rim of her cup. “You stormed in, hollered and stomped, accused and belittled. I don’t deserve that type of treatment. I won’t allow you to make me believe I do.”

“Oh, Anna, I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say or do. I miss you all the time.”

“I still miss you, too. But if you don’t trust me or my opinions, we have nothing.” She put her cup back on the table. “I think it’s time you left.” Reaching down, she took the cup from his hands and placed it on the tray next to hers. Taking his hand, she led him to the hallway, pausing to wrap her arms around his neck, holding him close one last time.

“I love you, Chance Walker. I wish I knew how to make you understand what that really means, and how much you hurt me,

whether you meant to or not.” Pulling back, she wiped a stray tear from her cheek. “Let me know when Lottie has her next concert in the city.” She was lost in his silvery gaze, its depth driving her slowly mad as she fought for composure. “Chance.” Her voice had turned into an intimate whisper.

“I love you, Anna. I’ll figure out a way to make you understand.” He was surprised when she pulled back sharply from him.

“No. Move on. Find someone you can love and trust. It isn’t me, but she must be out there, waiting and looking for you.”

“I found her in you, Anna.”

“I thought so for a while, too. I was wrong.”

“Please, one more try?”

“Good night, Chance. I wish you well, but I won’t see you anymore.”

“I understand. I won’t make a habit of stopping by.”

“Thank you for understanding.”

“Ileanna, if you ever think of a way for me to get back in your good graces, let me know.” She watched as he shook his head, a weary smile crossing his lips. He gave her one last hug then disappeared into the hall.

Anna bolted the door behind him then used it to support herself. “Well, that’s finally over. Maybe I can get back to work now.” Anna gave herself the pep talk as she wandered to the kitchen with the coffee tray. She mechanically went about cleaning up, tossing the whole boxed pizza into the refrigerator.

Starting to feel better, she knew she was all talk as soon as she turned on the lights in the master bedroom. Chance had made love to her here. She would never be able to look at this room in the same way.

“Maybe I’ll redecorate,” she said aloud, pacing around the room, trying to visualize it in a different color. Nothing came to her, sleep included. By three, she had taken her pillow and moved to the couch,

watching the night sky turn into daylight as she lay awake, wondering if there could be another way for her to trust Chance and start over.

Chapter Fifteen

Louis welcomed King Walker into his office. He'd seemed intrigued when King asked to discuss the situation in person. They had made the appointment.

"Come in, King, good to see you again." The men shook hands, Louis offering him a seat on the leather sofa in the far corner of the office. "Would you like coffee or a drink?"

"No thanks." He looked around the office, its dark wood paneling and worn leather furniture, realizing Louis was older than he had thought. The environment around him had come from years of living in the space. It was a side of him King hadn't wanted to get too close to. He wasn't used to being nervous and didn't quite know how to cope. He rose, wandering to the credenza behind the large oak partner's desk. Scanning the framed photos, he understood how much Anna had been a part of his life. He touched the frame of a young man in uniform, realizing it had been Anna's father, lost at war.

The collection included Anna from baby to adult, including the toothless grade-school years. He saw her in glimpses of life, aging into the woman he had met just a few months before. Louis was next to him, handing him his favorite—a picture of Anna standing in a graduation gown with Eddie on one side, her mother on the other.

"I should get to the point."

"It would be helpful."

"How would you feel about meddling in her private life a little?" King watched Louis' expression change, his eyes narrowed. Silently, he waited while Louis made a call, ordering coffee.

"It's not my first choice." It was a simple statement.

"It's never been my way to interfere with Chance's life. Actually, I made a point of staying out of his choices for many years." He went to the sofa, seating himself. "If I hadn't interfered, I never would have met Charlotte, never would have had Lottie."

"Why now?"

"When was the last time you saw her?" Louis held up his hand when there was a light knock on the door. He waited while his efficient assistant placed a tray on the coffee table in front of the sofa. "I'll pour, thank you. Please push back my next meeting." He received a curt nod from the woman as she left, shutting the door softly behind her. King waited while Louis poured the coffee into a cup, then sipped the aromatic brew he had been handed.

"I saw Anna two nights ago, and I'll be frank, I didn't like what I saw. She's lost weight. She's not sleeping, and she's on a short rope with her temper. Not like my Anna at all."

"Chance is falling apart. He goes through the motions every day, the work gets done, but it's just that, done. He's lost all enthusiasm for the national program, leaving it to his assistant. He worked so hard for so long. It isn't like him to delegate this baby to an assistant."

"What are you proposing, King?"

"I'm not really sure. I know Chance was wrong. He must have charged in like a bull, and worst of all, he apparently didn't even give her a chance to talk. He went off half-cocked, ranted and raved, and worst of all, left."

"I knew she was flying to the ranch to set him straight, how did that go? When she returned, she refused to tell me much. Just that she had done what she set out to—cleared her name and left."

"That's about it. I wish I could get the two of them in the same place and lock the door for a few hours."

"My sentiments exactly. If they could just work past this they would be so much stronger on the other side."

"Is there a way to make that happen?" King let his eyes meet Louis'. He watched as the older man sat back in his seat, his index

fingers tapping against each other. His brow had become creased, his eyes heavy lidded.

"I've tried to figure out how to get them in the same place, but nothing feels right. They'd suspect alternative motives from the start."

"Anna won't go to the ranch or the winery." Louis was just thinking out loud.

"I know. Even if we wound up in the same restaurant, one of them would bolt."

"What if we find a way to arrange a meeting and they still don't reconcile?" This time Louis asked King his question directly. Watching as King shook his head, he tossed the cloth napkin that had lain across his lap onto the coffee table.

"Then I walk away, but at least I would have tried. I'm not a romantic man, Louis. You and I are both men of a different generation, and we understand the ways of the world. They would be good for each other, with each other. They have a physical chemistry. What more could any two people ask for?"

"Does he love her?"

"He doesn't talk about it, but I'd say yes. He's never let a woman in this deep. Before, they only saw a small glimpse of him. No other woman has been invited to the ranch or the winery that I'm aware of."

"Anna will never forgive me for meddling. She's decided that she was right in the first place. They never should have gotten involved."

"That's usually when they fall the hardest."

"Let me think about this for a few days. I'll get back to you. Are you staying in town or on the island?"

"We'll be in town until Friday, and then we head back to the ranch. It's busy at the winery now, and important for Chance to spend his time there." King paused then hesitantly went on. "He should be enjoying this time in his life. He's worked so hard to get where he is."

"Call me if you think of anything. I'll get back to you before Friday." As the two men shook hands, their thoughts were similar.

How could he go about getting Chance and Anna back together? And did they have the right to try?

* * * *

Charlotte Walker dropped her bag on the counter, tossing the mail in a pile next to it. "Don't you walk away from me, King Walker. I want to know what you've done." King paused at the tone she used, and smiled because he knew she had gotten the exact response she had wanted, his attention. Sighing, he reached for her hand.

"Let's have a drink, and I'll explain."

"You certainly will," she added as she passed him. She set about filling glasses with ice and orange juice. King went to the freezer for the bottle of vodka he kept there. He splashed a little into each glass, then went back and added a second splash. Charlotte raised her eyebrows at the second one. She stirred the drinks, then handed one to him.

He waited for her to take her place across the table from him, wondering how many times they had sat this way, discussing everything that went on in their lives. She waited him out, reaching to take his hand.

"You look so grim. Please, King, tell me what's happened."

"I made a pact with the devil today." He heard her swift intake of breath and waited for it to be released. His eyes softened, as he watched her sip from her glass.

"Who is the devil this time?"

She teased him, and he loved her for it. "Louis Jennings." Charlotte's glass halted half way to the tabletop.

"Why Louis? What does he have to do with...?" Charlotte placed the glass on the table, taking her time to fold back the long sleeves of the shirt she wore. "King, my love, what have you done?"

"I just...we just wanted them to see each other one more time. See if they couldn't work past their troubles."

“Details?” She leaned forward over the table, waiting to take in all the information he would give her.

“I’m not a nice person, Charlotte. You’ve known that from the start, from the first day we met.”

“Yes, yes. You’ll burn in hell for all the wrong doings you’ve done in this lifetime. Now tell me what you and Louis did to Anna and Chance. And don’t leave out anything.” For the next hour, Charlotte listened with rapt attention to what King told her.

* * * *

Anna wanted to ignore the telephone. She had finally gotten into the drawings she was doing, finally found her muse with the story once more. The ringing had intruded on her several times already today. Grabbing it up, she was curt, “Yes?”

“Ileanna, this is Jacob Newman. How are you, dear?”

“Fine, Dr. Newman, and you?”

“Fine, dear, but there is one small problem you might help me with?” He listened to her breath catch in her throat.

“Louis, is he all right?”

“Yes, of course, just a little stubborn, as usual.” He spoke for several minutes before she hurried him off the phone.

“I can be there in fifteen minutes. Can you wait for me?”

“Of course, I won’t leave until you get here. Ileanna, Louis is fine, really. He just wanted me to let you know.”

“I’m on my way, Doctor.”

* * * *

Chance pulled the cell phone from his jacket pocket, answering briskly. He listened for a moment, and then threw down his pen.

“His apartment, I’ll be right over.”

* * * *

“Hold it, please.” An arm covered in worn denim reached out to block the elevator door from closing. Anna stepped into the car, reaching to push the button for Louis’ floor. Chance saw the confusion on her face seeing it had already been selected. She turned and only got out, “Thanks” before acknowledging it was him, that Chance that had held the door for her. “What are you doing here?” The car lurched as it started its climb.

“King called, something about Louis not feeling well, and he couldn’t locate you.” He watched as she tried to assimilate the information.

“I just got a call. I was home, working.” A look passed between them, the door opening onto Louis’ floor before either of them could explore it any further.

Chance followed Anna as she all but sprinted to the apartment. Her key was in the lock, the door thrown open. Tossing her backpack into a corner of the hallway, she was gone from his sight when he saw King. A man he had never met stood beside him.

“So glad you came, son. This is Dr. Newman, Louis’ physician. He’s going to be fine, just a little heartburn it seems, but I felt awkward about the situation.” King walked to the sofa in Louis Jennings’ apartment and sat heavily.

“King, tell me what happened.” Chance was leery of the situation. Finding King involved with Louis just didn’t sit right.

“We ran into each other at lunch today, and soon after he wasn’t feeling well. I couldn’t put him in a cab alone, so I saw him back here. He called his friend, Dr. Newman, but I still hadn’t been able to reach Anna. I thought you might know where I could try.”

“I assume you tried her at home and on her cell?”

“Yes, yes. No answer anywhere. Louis seemed to calm down when I reassured him that I’d find her for him.” King let his head rest on his palms, an exhausted breath releasing slowly from him. He did

it more to keep from looking Chance in the eye than from exhaustion, but it covered his guilty face.

“How did you finally reach her?”

“I finally found her. Silly really, I couldn’t remember her number.” Chance watched as Dr. Newman went to the small corner bar and poured himself a short drink. He was surprised when he downed it.

“What kind of doctor is he?” Chance whispered to King.

“More of a family friend I think.”

“He’s doing much better. I gave him some antacids and a sedative. He’ll sleep for a while.”

“Thank you, Doctor. This is my son, Chance Walker.”

“How do you do? Mr. Jennings was asking to speak with you.” Chance looked to King, then back to the doctor.

* * * *

Chance watched Anna as she looked at Louis. Her hair was cut short again, but she still had that haunted look behind her eyes. Slowly the urge to touch her was becoming overwhelming. He allowed himself to go to her, to kneel beside her chair. Chance took her hand in his, and she let him fold her into his arms. He hugged her tight as she finally let out the tears she had been holding back, rocking her body gently against him. He knew this was right. She belonged in his arms, forever.

Slowly, Anna pulled back from Chance. He reluctantly let her go, reaching back for a box of tissues on the nightstand. Louis took a deep breath in his afternoon sleep and rolled slightly on his side.

Chance reached for her hand. “Come, I’ll make you some coffee. He’s resting.” He noted several emotions cross her face, and she started to turn him down. Finally she allowed her hand to wrap around his outstretched one. The warmth from her touch ran through him, reminding him of the fact that he wanted more from her in every way.

* * * *

King paced the small living room, waiting for them to come out. He seemed surprised she went directly to him, engulfing him in a bear hug.

“Thank you for taking care of him,” she whispered. He was too choked up to answer, so he didn’t. He held her close for another moment, and decided to try to make his getaway. When he released her, she remembered her manners.

“I’ll get some coffee, and you can tell me exactly what happened.” Her tone alarmed him, but they had gone this far. There was no turning back now.

King balanced the mug of coffee on his knee, unable to even sip at it. “It was just luck we ran into each other at lunch, Anna. Then afterwards he mentioned he wasn’t feeling well. I simply brought him home and waited until Dr. Newman got here. He’s the miracle worker.”

“I don’t understand. He’s never had a problem before. He’s always had a cast-iron stomach.”

“It probably wasn’t a good idea to have the chili with avocado salsa after the cheese-stuffed fried peppers.”

“Is he crazy? My stomach turns at the thought of it. No wonder he... He never eats that junk.” She gave the men a questioning look.

King stood, placing his mug on the table. “I’d better be going. Chance, you’ll keep Anna company for a while.”

“Of course.”

“You take care of the old guy. I’m growing quite fond of him.” He paused to hug Anna, smiling to the both of them. “You two take care.” He was gone from the apartment in record time, choosing to take the stairs for several floors rather than wait for the elevator.

* * * *

“So, you two old coots cooked this all up, including Dr. Newman?”

“Yes. Actually, he is a friend of the family and not too happy with the part we asked him to play.”

“Louis was never in danger, and never had a heart attack?”

“No. We never said he did. We were very specific to say it was just a case of heartburn. And he didn’t actually take any sedative. He was feigning sleep.”

“But not until you had them both in the same apartment with Louis supposedly napping instead of playing golf.”

“That about sums it up.”

“Now you feel terrible for lying, and you want me to ease your conscience. You want to hear that it was all right for you to scare the wits out of your son and Louis’s granddaughter to enable them to spend some time together.”

“Yes.”

Charlotte shook her head at her husband. Slowly she gathered up their empty glasses, pausing only to kiss his cheek. “I think I’ll need another drink before I can tell you that it was the right thing to do.” She laughed, kissing his lips. “But, I want on the record that I had nothing to do with this, understand?”

“Yes. Anything you say.” His arms went around her waist and pulled her onto his lap.

Chapter Sixteen

Anna had gone back to sit beside Louis's bed. She alternated every five minutes or so, checking on him and pacing the small living room. Chance had just returned with sandwiches, and she was hesitant to leave Louis alone.

"He'll be fine. We can hear him from the kitchen." She took Chance's hand, following him into the kitchen. He had set everything out on the small counter. His memory had immediately gone back to the night he had come to talk to Louis, just after Anna had stormed the ranch and left without giving him a chance to apologize.

"I appreciate you staying with me, Chance, but you must have better things to do. How's the campaign going?" She listened as he told her about his latest trip to the food show in Chicago and the orders they took.

He watched as she started to just pick at the turkey sandwich before her, then after a while he smiled as he realized she was eating the whole thing, garlic pickle included. Neither said much while they ate. She had tossed her napkin down and went to check on Louis one more time. When she returned, she hung back in the doorway, watching him as he gathered up the paper wrappings from their supper.

Knowing he was being watched made him nervous. He tossed the papers in the garbage and knew it was a mistake. She caught his eye, and he realized it.

"What do you know about this, Chance?" He put up his hands, shaking his head.

"I just got back last night."

“Then how did you know where the garbage is kept in Louis’s kitchen?”

“Because I’ve been here before, the day you came to the ranch, I flew back, and came to see him.”

“He never told me.”

“I’m getting the same feeling you are, that we’re both here by powers that put us here.” She nodded, making a fresh pot of coffee.

“The page on the newspaper beside Grandfather’s bed is different. He’s been awake.” Her eyes narrowed and he accepted her realization. “Seems they went to a lot of trouble to get us in the same place at the same time. How did you get here today?” Anna listened intently as Chance described the call he had gotten.

“Louis was ill. King couldn’t find you, and he wasn’t sure what to do so he called me.”

“All very convenient, considering I was home all morning, working. Just as I had told Louis I planned to last night when he called.”

“King said you were unreachable.”

“Jacob reached me on the first try.” Studying her carefully, he watched as she bit the inside of her lip, her mind putting together all the pieces, as anger ran through her. “That son-of-a...” She boosted herself up onto the counter, smiling broadly. “We’ve been had, Chance. This was a set up.” He only nodded at her words. “What would you like to do about it?” she asked and watched him cross the length of the kitchen to her, pausing for only a second before she was in his arms.

“I say we take advantage of it and worry about revenge later.” Chance drew her closer, and his kiss melted away her anger. It felt so right for her to be where she was, in his arms, his lips to hers. Ileanna let Chance kiss her.

“Ileanna?” They pulled apart at the sound of Louis’ voice. She started to laugh as she wiped her lipstick off the corner of Chance’s lip.

“Want to have some fun?” He only nodded at the sparkle in her eye. Taking her hand they both went to Louis’ bedroom, Anna pausing before they went in. “Follow my lead, and we may just break him.” Her grin was evil and Chance kissed her before he changed his mind. Pulling back, he watched as she transferred the thin gold band from her right hand to her left third finger.

Louis was sitting up, bright and cheery, rested and relaxed. She took a deep breath then grabbed Chance’s hand. He had no idea what she had in mind, so he decided to stay in the background, leaning against the door frame as Anna rushed to Louis’ bedside.

“Grandfather, you’re awake.” She threw her arms around his neck, giving him a big hug. “Don’t you ever scare us like that again. Chance, would you call the surgeon and let him know Louis is awake, please. Also, call the facility and ask them when they can get an ambulance here, and remind them there’s a helipad on the roof if it will take too long by car.” Chance pulled the phone from the pocket of his denim jacket and took two steps into the hallway, pretending to make calls.

“What’s this about a facility, Anna?”

“Hush, now, Grandfather. The surgeon warned us you would be disoriented for a while, but you’re going to be fine, just fine. Why your hair has grown over the scar already.” For effect, she pushed back the hair from his forehead. Grabbing her hand, Louis pulled it away.

“Have you both gone crazy? I only napped for a bit.”

“Yes, Grandfather.” She placated, “We know you’re confused, but with a little time we’ll tell you everything you missed.” She settled back on his bedside, purposely choosing to put her left hand on top of his.

“Child, what is this nonsense?”

Chance stood in the hallway, listening to Ileanna psyche out her grandfather. He was proud of her and a little intimidated, realizing she could someday do the same thing to him. He took a step further down

the hall when he heard her say, "Surgery was two months ago," afraid they would hear his laughter. After several minutes, he returned to the sick room. Louis was starting to look confused.

"Everything's all set. The surgeon will stop by a little later and decide how soon we can move Louis to the facility."

"What facility?" Louis barked.

"The rehab center, of course, after lying in this bed for over two months, it's going to take a lot of hard work and physical therapy to get you up and about again, but I know you can do it, Louis." She only called him by name on occasion. This time she stood up. "Chance, I'll call his office and let them know the good news. Now maybe we can get rid of that jerk who expected to take over. Louis can find his own replacement now." She fled the room quickly, biting her inner cheek to keep from laughing.

"Chance Walker, you come in here," he bellowed.

Entering the room, he chose to sit in the chair, just out of Louis' reach. "What's all this nonsense? I simply had a heavy lunch and got a bad case of heartburn. Why would anyone take over my clients? Who authorized..."

"Louis, we know this is hard to understand, but we were warned." Chance took a deep breath. "When you had your...episode, as we call it, well, someone had to continue your work. We didn't know how long you might be...asleep, so we had to let Parker step in and take over your files." Chance knew throwing in Parker's name would work. When he'd last seen Louis, there had been an issue at the office and Louis was contemplating letting the man go for ethical reasons. It had led them into an interesting discussion.

"Parker, that idiot. I'm firing him Friday. He's nothing but a self-proclaimed..." Louis paused, watching Chance's face intently. "If I was so sick, why am I home in my own bed? There, I've you now," he said.

"We didn't want you to deteriorate in a hospital. As soon as you were stable after the life support machines were shut down, Ileanna

had you transferred back home. You have four nurses that have taken wonderful care of you. You'll like them, but to be honest, Martha doesn't know how to give a decent haircut. Now you're awake, I'll phone and have your barber come in tomorrow and give you the works. I'll be right back. Anna's probably having a crying fit in the kitchen. She's been so worried about you, Louis, you'll never know. Why, she wouldn't even let us take a honeymoon trip until...she was afraid to leave you. Sit tight, I'll be right back." Chance fled the bedroom in which Louis was reclining, totally confused.

Anna pulled Chance toward her in the kitchen. Slowly she slipped her arms around his neck. He'd missed the feeling she created within him. It felt so right, kissing her lightly. He knew that no matter what had happened he didn't want to lose her.

"You are brilliant," he whispered in her ear. Smiling, she pulled back.

"And you, my dear, are a genius. No honeymoon trip!" She paused, laughingly saying, "Not my idea of how to start a marriage." She made a cup of chamomile tea, the kind she knew Louis hated the most. As she poured the hot water over the infuser, she gave him another sly grin. "He hates tea, only keeps it in the house for me." Pausing on her way past him, she stopped to lightly slap his butt. "I've missed you, Chance."

"Ileanna, you'll never know how much I missed you, how wrong I was not to believe in you."

"Later, let's finish playing with Louis, and then we can decide what to do about King."

"I've had a few thoughts on that." He kissed her forehead, "Later."

"Yes, Chance, later."

He caught her double meaning and finally felt the release he had been holding back since that awful tape arrived. Catching her arm just before she went into the bedroom, he smiled.

"What about Scott?"

“Much later for that.” Again her sly grin was impressive.

“Please, Grandfather, it’s what the doctor said I could give you. He said not to do anything else until he got here.” She settled the mug on the nightstand, a cloth napkin under it. “So, I kept a diary, of all the things I thought you might like to get caught up on. Do you want to start with politics or social events?” Without giving him a chance to answer, she went on. “I suppose we should start with the wedding.”

“Wedding? Whose wedding?”

“Why, Chance and I, of course. We held the ceremony right here in this very room, just one week after they released you from the hospital.” She watched his eyes cloud over. His hands went to their steeple position. “It really was lovely, although we were afraid to bring in flowers. We didn’t want to add to your breathing problems. Oh, Grandfather, it was so lovely. Don’t you remember any of it? We had hoped by having the ceremony here, you might have heard it at least...”

“It’s okay, Anna. We have lots of pictures for Louis to see.”

Anna caught his hands fisting against the bed covers out of the corner of her eye. “We chose to use Eddie’s ring. I hope you don’t mind. I thought it would be like always having a piece of both of you with me, us I mean, even after you’re...”

“I’m not dead yet, child. Now get out of here so I can get dressed. I’ll see you both in the living room, and there’d better be a tall brandy and cigar waiting for me.” His bellowing garnered no response, except for a small smile from Anna.

She leaned forward, hugging him tightly. I’ve missed you, so please don’t ever scare us that way again. Chance has moved his offices to be closer here and I’ve turned your study here into a studio of sorts. He’s been very understanding about the time I’ve spent here with you.”

“Ileanna, I only napped for an hour, now get out of this room, right now. Chance, I want a cigar and brandy, now.” Again neither one moved.

“Grandfather, I realize that these were your old habits, and someday you may be able to enjoy them again, but for now, nothing but the chamomile tea.” They watched as confusion and resentment crossed his face, and then it turned to anger, and finally, he cracked a smile.

“Oh, all right, I’m sorry. But I had only the best intentions.”

“Get dressed, Louis. We’ll be waiting in the living room.” Chance reached for her hand, and Anna gave it willingly.

* * * *

They were in the elevator heading up to Chance’s apartment. He knew King and Charlotte would be there. His arm around her shoulder, they both beamed with smiles. “I think we better lose this happy mood if we’re going to even get a little rise from him.” Anna turned, stroking his cheek lightly.

“You’re right, but, Chance...”

“Only for a few minutes. From then on, only happiness.” The door opened to his lobby floor, and Chance drew her to the side. A small table held a large arrangement of fresh flowers. Pulling her backpack off her shoulder, he handed it to her. “Got any makeup in here?”

“Yeah, a few things,” she answered, rummaging to the bottom for the small zippered case. “Powder, lipstick, mascara, and liner, that’s all.”

“Give me the liner.” Taking the pencil from her, she watched as he wiped a small amount on the tip of his index finger and smeared it with his thumb. When he finished, her smile was like laughter he hadn’t heard for such a long time. She stood straight and tall as he wiped the charcoal under her eyes and shadowed her lids. He wiped off the rest of her lipstick with several of his kisses, figuring they were ready.

“Do I want to know what you’ve made me look like?” There was an oval wall mirror behind her, but she opted not to look.

“You look like the woman I’m going to marry as soon as possible.”

“Do I now?”

“Yes, but not until you take off that silly makeup.” She started to protest, then shook her head.

“Shall we get this over with? I’d like to wash my face as soon as possible.” He took her arm, walking her down the familiar hallway to his family’s apartment.

“Do you think Louis called?”

“He promised he wouldn’t. And he knows he’s on thin ice with me now.”

Chance opened the front door, hollering loudly to Charlotte and King. He held back a grin as they came rushing from their bedroom. Ileanna slumped against his body as they had discussed and he helped her to the couch. Charlotte was already pulling on her robe and King was pulling on his as they rushed toward them.

“Oh, my goodness.” Charlotte went to Anna’s side, taking her hand. “What’s happened?” Chance noticed that King hung back.

“Louis, he’s in the hospital.”

“What?” Charlotte gasped.

“We thought everything was all right, and then he woke with pain in his arm and...” Chance went and sat on the other side of Ileanna. Pulling her against him, she tucked her face against his shoulder.

“What can we do?” Charlotte offered.

“It’s out of our hands now. We’ll know something by morning. I didn’t want to leave Anna alone.”

“Of course not. I’ll get Lottie’s room ready, and I’ll start a pot of tea.” She was in instant motion, one of the small things Chance loved about his stepmother. King took her arm, holding her in place. Looking to him, she was confused. “King, let me get the tea.”

“In a minute, my dear.” King walked her back into the living room and motioned for her to take a seat. Just when he was about to speak, Chance’s phone rang. They all listened as he said yes and

nodded a few times, then said, "Thank you, we'll be right there." Turning to Anna, he held her hand. "They think you should come back right away." Standing with her to leave, he finally saw the stricken look on King's face. The look he had been waiting for. Anna realized it at the same time, remorse. For long seconds no one said a word.

Finally, Charlotte rose, still confused. "Are we all going to stand here or are we going to the hospital to see Louis?" Anna crossed to her, taking her in her arms, their embrace warm and loving.

"We aren't going anywhere, we've been had." King's voice was firm. "We, or at least I, have been taught a lesson in meddling." His eyes met Chances, and he knew he was right.

"I'm sorry, Charlotte." Chance told her sincerely.

"I hope you're not upset," Anna asked as she pulled away from her.

"Confused is more like it. I would like a sherry, King, and then some answers from all of you." She took her seat, waiting for someone to explain.

"But are you together?" Charlotte finally asked.

"We'll let you know when we decide." Anna had just returned from washing away the dark circles under her eyes.

"Ready, Anna?" Chance asked.

"Yes." She went to Charlotte and gave her another hug. "I'm sorry we worried you. We really were just after King."

She received a warm smile in return. Walking to him, she hugged him also. "And you, King Walker, well, I'll get back to you about this, but please, no more meddling. I made Louis promise the same thing. I love you both for trying to get us together, but whatever happens it has to be our decision. Can you understand that?"

"Yes, Anna. I promise, no more meddling."

"Thank you." She kissed his cheek, moving toward Chance who was waiting at the door.

“Good night.” He nodded to them, as Anna waved, uttering a hurried “Bye” as they left the apartment.

Once the door closed, he pulled her to him. “Where do we go from here, Anna?” He watched her think for only a moment before answering.

“My place. I want to show you something.” She let her arm find its way around his waist as his found her shoulders.

Chapter Seventeen

Anna led him through the darkened hallway, not turning on the lights. Opening the willow door, he saw only the Manhattan skyline of lights ahead of him. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.” She dropped her backpack in the corner of the living room, disappearing down the hallway. “Ready.” She returned, taking his hand. As she led him down the hallway, he stopped.

“Anna?”

“It’s all right, Chance.” There was a sparkle of life in her eyes, one that had been missing for a long time. Even in the darkened hallway he could tell it was there. It gave him a scare, realizing how easily he had hurt her and how hard he would try to never do it again.

“Chance?” He brushed aside the thought, following her to the last door, the nymph. She had turned lights on in the studio, back lighting the graceful maiden that guarded what was behind her.

Pushing open the door, she stepped aside, letting Chance take in the room. Again, he saw the skyline, a mirror to the living room. On his first glance, it was just an art studio. Worktables held projects in process. Supplies were stacked on metal shelves along the far wall. It wasn’t until he walked into the room that he realized its power.

The three walls were painted white, as well as the ceiling. The fourth wall was glass. As he turned, he saw the first of her works, a small watercolor framed in bronze. The entire wall surface of the room held her work. From ceiling to floor, from oil’s to pen and ink and pencil sketches. Anna lived behind this door. Walking slowly, he wanted to touch each one, to feel the texture. He stopped in front of a charcoal sketch of a young man.

“That’s my impression of my dad,” Anna said proudly.

Chance turned, questioning her without words.

“I was too young to really remember him, but I know he was always close by me, especially at night. I remember him calming me during a storm, reassuring me everything would be all right. Mom came in and the dream faded. He never visited me again. This was how I remember him.”

“How old were you?” He watched as Anna boosted herself up onto the flat surface of a worktable nearby.

“The dream, I was maybe four or five. It’s just a fragment now. The drawing, I did in my teens.” She sighed heavily. “Mom told me the likeness was just from the photos I’d been shown all my life, and she was probably right. But, somehow, I know this didn’t come from a photograph.”

“What did Louis and Eddie have to say about it?”

“Grandmother had it framed over mother’s protests. It hung in her bedroom until she passed.”

“And Louis?”

“Ah, he did the unthinkable. He sent me to art school, bless his soul.” She threw her head back and laughed. For the next few minutes, she gave him brief descriptions of each piece he looked at.

“Would you like something?” Watching Chance catch the phrase, he chose to smile, grinning as the blush ran up her throat.

Chance almost choked on his breath. He had to maintain some kind of cool at this point. He was so afraid of doing or saying the wrong thing, afraid that he might break the spell they were drawn into.

“How about a glass of wine?”

She jumped down from the table. “I’ll be right back.” She found him seated on the tile floor, his legs crossed in front of him, his weight held by his arms behind him. He was staring at the watercolor of her mother. Quietly, she went and sat down beside him, handing him one of the glasses.

“That was my mother.”

“Did she sit for it?”

“No. She didn’t accept art was a form of work and could be rewarding. She was a woman with a heart that was broken at an early age. I don’t know that I ever really saw her have fun. She smiled a lot and was very kind, but always so sad.”

“I’ve seen that same haunted look, before.”

“Really, on who?” Chance realized she didn’t see it, or didn’t want to see the similarities between the watercolor and herself.

“I’ve seen it in your eyes, Anna. I put it there the day I charged in here.” He looked away, then rose and started to wander around the rest of the room. He sipped at the wine, mainly because it was already in his hand. Waiting for her to accept what he had said, he kept pacing. Finally, he turned. She held out her hand. He didn’t hesitate, going to her and pulling her up to her feet.

* * * *

“Is the look still there?” He met her gaze, looking deeply, trying to figure out how to say what he was thinking.

“Anna, I hurt you, deeply. I’ll never be able to take that back from you. You’ll always carry a small part of it with you.” He looked away, but didn’t take his arms from around her.

“Isn’t pain a part of life? If I had never met you, then you wouldn’t have hurt me. If we hadn’t met, I never would have known how deeply I could love someone.” Her voice trailed off, her words captured by his kiss. “I have one more thing to talk to you about and it may end us all together.” He gave her a quizzical look. Anna let out the breath she’d been holding and walked to a shelf at the far end of the room. Returning to Chance with the leather bound photo album, she hesitated for only a moment before opening it and finding the picture she wanted him to see. “I figured we’d better get past this now,” she stated and turned the album so he could see the photo.

It was from years earlier, Anna with a group of friends she went to college with. They were dressed for Halloween. More important, she was dressed in all black as a witch. She had a pointed black hat and black mask that covered half her face, studded with rhinestones. She'd worn a tight black bustier that pushed her breasts high and a wispy skirt with a handkerchief edge. Black boots with high slim heels completed her outfit. Chance took the book from her as he took a step back to lean on the worktable.

"That first time we met in the elevator I took one look at you and knew there was something about you I couldn't quite put together. When I left the building, I instantly remembered this party. Remembered how I'd been attracted to a cowboy and in a moment of absolute abandon, led you to the darkened stairwell." Anna knew her face was bright red with embarrassment, the heat on her cheeks overwhelming, but she kept talking.

"I'd never done anything like that before, but I took one look at you that night and decided just once in my life I wanted something for me, just for me without long-term repercussions. And I got what I asked for, an amazing snippet of time when the real world didn't exist, just you and me in masks, being anyone we wanted, not ashamed of our needs or wants." She paused and took a deep breath. Chance still held the album, his mouth slightly agape as he stared at the photo. "So, that's my last secret. Before we take this any further or we hurt each other anymore, I wanted you to know who you fucked in the hallway that night." She paused and waited until he glanced up at her. "Yes, we fucked with abandon, it wasn't making love. But it was the best sex I'd ever had.

"Now you know, what do you have to say? I tried to remind you about this when the video crap came up but you seemed disinterested."

Chance shook his head and did the one thing she wasn't expecting. He burst out laughing. "Damn it, Anna, do you have any idea how that night stayed with me? How many times I'd conjure up

your image, usually at the most inappropriate moments, and relive those minutes? How many times I wondered what happened to you, or if I should try and find you?" He laughed harder before continuing. "No wonder I was so attracted so fast. I'd been there and done that and lost it. Lost you."

"You thought about me after the party?"

"How could I not? When you dropped before me to suck me, all I could see was those piercing green eyes through the mask. They were so expressive. I've never forgotten that night, just filed it away as a memory." He closed the album and handed it back to her. "My suggestion is we keep this night to ourselves, just as we did for all these years. Let's not let anyone else know we'd met and walked away. They'd all know instantly how stupid a man I am at times."

"So you're not going to hold it against me?"

"How can I? I was a participant too. A very willing participant, I might add. Do you have any idea how many women I never dated a second time because they couldn't live up to the memories from that night?"

"So what do we do now that you know all my secrets?"

"And you know mine too. I'd say we'd better stay together and live out all the fantasies we've had of each other all this time."

"Fantasies and reality are two very different things."

"I'd like to combine them. Live our reality every day with the woman who haunted my dreams all these years."

"Chance, remember how you took me against the wall..."

"Oh, I certainly do. I also remember how you tasted that night, how full your breasts were in my hands, how hard your nipples got."

"Let's finish this conversation in the bathtub. Slowly she left him, taking her glass with her."

He followed a few minutes later, finding her filling the tub, tossing a handful of sea salts across the water. He carried the rest of the bottle of wine with him, hesitating in the doorway.

“Shy?” Anna questioned him. He watched as she went about setting out fluffy gray towels then went to turn on the stereo. Returning, she slowly started to strip off the layers of clothing that she had worn all day. She kicked her shoes in the bottom of the closet then stripped off her sweater, jeans, and shirt. Left only in her bra and lace panties, she scooted past him where he still stood, mesmerized by her actions. As she lit candles on the counter, she turned off the harsh overhead lights. Turning to face him, she slipped off her bra, tossing it toward the hamper. At the edge of the filling tub, she sat, pulling off her panties. They too were tossed in the direction of a hamper.

My God, Chance thought as he watched her prepare their bath. Realizing he still stood there with the bottle in hand, fully dressed, Anna had slipped into the fragrant water, her hand held out.

“Chance?”

“Oh, Ileana, will you marry me?” Her expression changed, and he thought for a moment that she might not accept. Instead, he watched as she bit the corner of her lip, a smile starting to bud its way through.

“Only if you get in the tub with me.” Her laugh went straight to his heart. If this was what it meant to be head over heels in love, then he was. He kicked off his shoes, tossed his wallet on the floor, and joined her in the whirlpool, fully clothed. “I suppose I’ll have to learn to be more specific in the future?”

“Might be a good idea.”

She went willingly into the circle of his arms, the swirling water from the jets bubbling up his shirt.

“I’ll try to never hurt you again, Anna.”

“I know that, Chance. You know it too. Because if you did, I’d leave you, forever. Once is a mistake, twice, well, just don’t push me on it.” Laughing, she pushed him down under her, holding him with her weight as she worked to strip off the wet cloth.

* * * *

Later, Chance lay exhausted across Anna's bed. Her head lay on his chest, her legs hanging over one edge. "Where would you like to get married?" Chance asked her, his hand idly brushing through her curls.

"At home, of course."

"Here at the apartment?" He was surprised, but hoped his voice didn't let on.

"No, you idiot, at the Long Island house, I thought the tasting room would be a perfect place for our wedding."

"But..."

"The winery is your home, Chance. I've known that since the first time you started to tell me about it. It's the light in your eyes."

"You'd be willing to move out there with me?"

"A husband and wife usually live together, unless you have something else in mind," she teased him, and he knew life was good. "Why couldn't we just go where we need to be, when we need to be there? You have an office here in the city now. I can be flexible where I work, but I have to retain some contact with the agencies. We have this apartment or yours and the ranch."

"But, Anna?"

"Chance, if you think you're getting a wife who will stay at home waiting alone for you, you're crazy. I like Charlotte and King's arrangement. They travel together all the time. That's how I see us."

"And you wouldn't mind?"

"Together, we're one strong unit. Apart we're only two halves. I want you with me all the time."

"What about schools for the kids?"

"What about it? Lottie's doing just fine. She was home schooled. I have a college degree. I think I can manage to teach our kids how to read and write."

"I love you, Anna. Just when I think there's a roadblock, you just turn the corner and find another way. That's a rare gift."

He had been quiet for a long time. The sun was just coming up. They hadn't gone to sleep yet. They were both awake. Finally she couldn't stand it anymore. "Chance, what's wrong?" He started to appease her with nothings until she put her finger to his lips. "Chance, what's wrong?" He held her gaze, not blinking.

"What about Scott?"

Anna rolled over, laughing so hard she was almost reduced to tears. Chance had rolled onto his side, watching her. "Are you going to share with me?" He knew she obviously knew something he didn't. Holding out her hand to him, he drew her closer to his body as she used the corner of the sheet to wipe away her tears.

"I forgot you've been out of the loop. You haven't heard. Scott Armstrong was given a promotion of sorts, head of something or other at the new headquarters."

"Why would you find that so funny?"

"Unfortunately for him, it's in Iowa. His father decided to start a subsidiary and Scott was given the choice to go or find work elsewhere. It's pretty hard for a man like Scott to get a real job. At least this way, he still gets to live in the style he's grown accustomed to."

"But, what about April?"

Anna stroked his chest, snuggling under the sheet against his lean body. She took him in her hand, lightly teasing him to life. "That's the best part. It seems she's pregnant." She watched Chance's face. He still didn't get it. "With someone else's baby! Remember at the engagement party, she was dancing with a short man with a ponytail? Doesn't matter. It's his. Apparently, since that party, they've been inseparable. After you and Grandfather found out about Scott's mistress, she decided it best if they went their separate ways, with a very healthy settlement I'm sure."

"And Scott gets banished to Iowa?"

"Something like that. Although I spent some time in Iowa City one summer taking classes. It was a beautiful place. I'm not sure if

they're prepared for Scott." She paused, then added, "The Armstrongs are a proud family, and Scott has used up all his markers. Taking him out of the picture for a while seemed like a good idea to his father."

"Couldn't happen to a nicer person. I'm glad for April. I hope she's happy this time."

"I don't really care if they are or aren't as long as they leave us alone to live our lives. It's tough enough out there without people like Scott going around and making more mischief."

"I could think of some mischief you could get into." He closed his lips over hers, her hand closing tighter around his erection. As she snuggled closer, he pulled back, jumping from the bed.

Anna was startled, but lazed and stretched against the tangled sheets. Chance came back, tossing his wallet onto the dresser as he passed. After he had climbed back into bed and replaced her hand where it was, he handed her a small white slip of folded paper. Anna twisted around, taking it from him. Looking to him before she opened it, he smiled.

"I held onto it for you."

Slowly Anna opened the paper, realizing it was her fortune from the first night he had brought her Chinese food. Staring at it, she started to laugh. "Trust what's in your heart," she read.

Propping the paper against the base of the light on the nightstand, she turned her attention back to him.

THE END

WWW.LILLITHPAYNE714.COM
LILLITHPAYNE714@YAHOO.COM

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Having been born and raised on Long Island, New York, Lillith and her husband were both eager to leave the urban lifestyle and explore their futures. With his encouragement, Lillith is living her dream of writing romance novels full time. Their new rural setting allows them to enjoy time together, and Lillith can spend many guiltless hours in her imagination, indulging her other passion. When she realized her works consistently tended toward the erotic, she gave herself permission to explore places she might not venture in real life.

You can learn more about Lillith and her work at her website, www.lillithpayne714.com. She loves to hear from her readers, and can be contacted at lillithpayne714@yahoo.com.

Also by Lillith Payne

Print Collection: *Erotic Fantasies Come True*

Deceptions Revealed

Her Dark Dragon

Magnificent Abandon

Just One Night

Lust Or Love

Her Alpha Male

The Gelid Woman

One Second Chance

The Arrangement

Available at

BOOKSTRAND.COM



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com