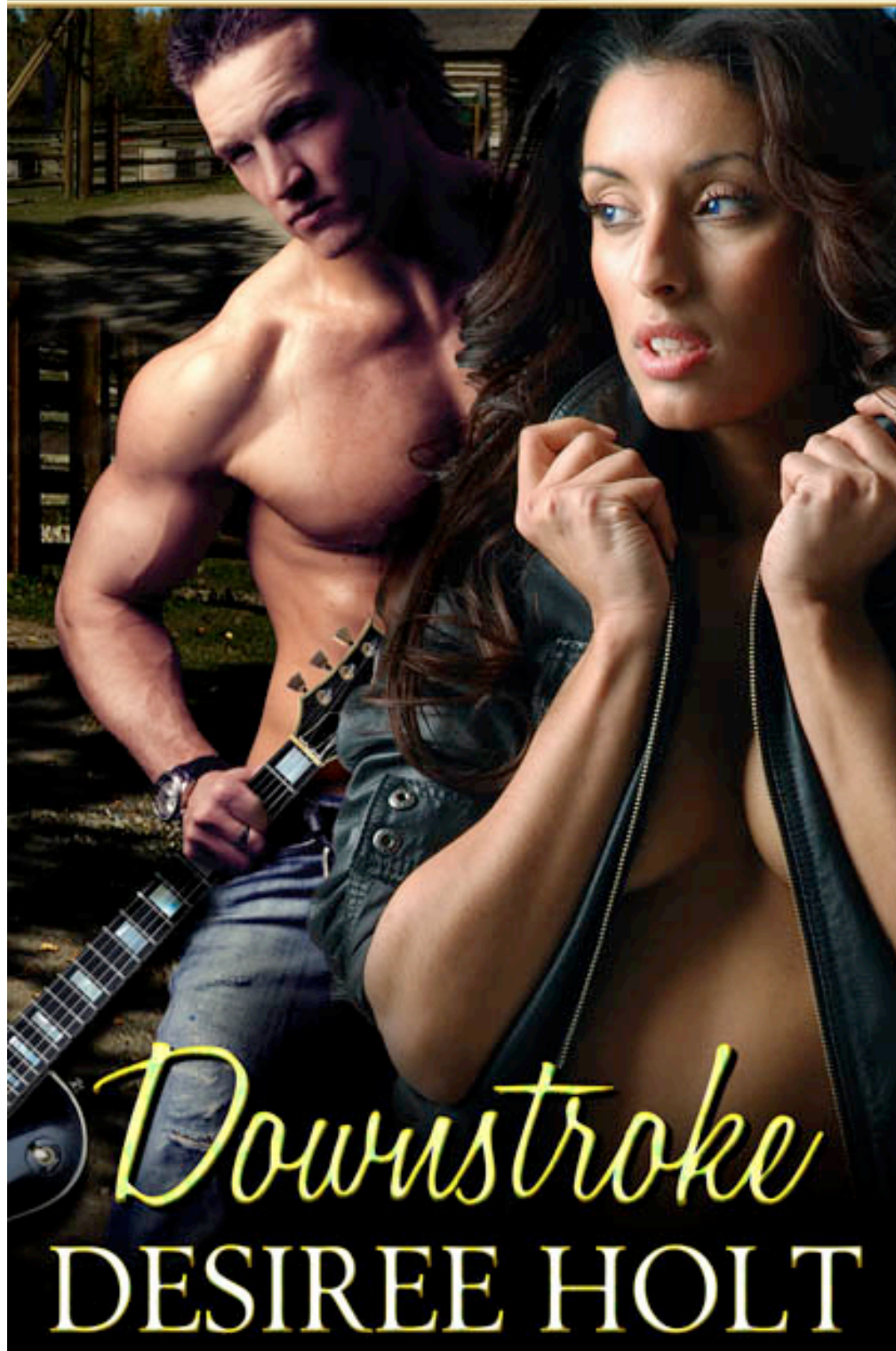


ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*



Downstroke

Desiree Holt

It's been twenty years since security specialist Charley Roper and country star Dallas Creed had their bitter parting. Now a killer has brought them together again, but neither is ready for a reunion—despite signs that their explosive chemistry hasn't waned with time. She can't forget the feel of his hands on her body. He can't forget the hot touch of her mouth. When they finally tumble into bed, the sex is just as good as they remember, hot enough to singe the sheets. But is it enough?

Thrown together during an exhausting, frenzied concert tour, with a killer nipping at their heels, Dallas and Charley find themselves on a hot, suspenseful, erotic roller coaster ride. Can he convince her to trust her heart to him one more time, to reach out for a richer, deeper, more mature love?

More importantly — can Charley keep Dallas alive long enough for either of them to enjoy a second chance?

Ellora's Cave Publishing



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Downstroke

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DOWNSTROKE

Desiree Holt

Dedication

To all the musicians who passed through the doors of Delphi Productions. We had our own roller coaster ride. And to Dr. Steve, the inspiration for Dallas Creed.

Acknowledgments

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Downstroke

Down-stroke

noun

*the technique used by musicians
who perform on string instruments
in which the pick is moved in a downward motion
relative to the position of the instrument
against one or more of the strings
to make them vibrate.*

a stroke from the top to the bottom

Prologue

The moon was nearly hidden behind scudding clouds, making long-range vision nearly impossible. But the man some called Heartless didn't care. He had night-vision goggles and a scope on the rifle that could see through anything. He crouched just below the crest of the hill behind a thick, ancient oak. Waiting. His quarry would be along sooner or later and he had nothing to spend but time. His first two efforts had gone wrong, which really pissed him off. He'd wanted this to be once and done, but apparently fate had other plans for him.

Thinking about how things had turned upside down brought a bitter taste to his mouth. What a good deal they'd had going, he and his so-called partner. A sweet business that netted them hundreds of thousands of dollars. Only Mister Smooth was greedy now. The asshole. He wanted more. Much more.

Killing Dallas Creed hadn't been Heartless' first objective but he couldn't come up with an alternative. His so-called partner had turned squeamish on him, but finally agreed they had to do something.

Heartless hunkered down, trying to quell his impatience. He really wanted to take out Dallas' brother but that might bring too many questions. And everyone knew big stars like Dallas had people who hated them. Stalked them. For any reason. Crazy reasons. After a while the trail would grow cold and police would stop looking. And Heartless could draw a full breath.

He glanced down again at the road twisting its way through the extrusions of land that gave the Texas Hill Country its name. He'd come here almost every evening for a week now, hoping not to get caught, waiting for his chance. He knew Dallas sometimes went into town after dinner, just to shoot the shit with people at the local bar. People he'd grown up with, who didn't expect him to be Dallas Creed. Heartless couldn't get onto the ranch so this was his best opportunity.

These days Dallas' brother came along, so he could get rid of the real problem and no one would be the wiser. He really regretted having to do this but sometimes you just didn't have any other options. So. Shoot the tires out on the bad curve and get Dallas to roll the truck like he'd done three years ago when he nearly killed himself. Only this time when Dallas rolled, Heartless would hit the gas tank and it would all be over.

Headlights pierced the darkness below him and his heartbeat ratcheted up a notch. He pushed back the NVGs, shouldered the rifle and set his eye to the scope.

Wait for it. Wait for it.

Breathe in. You know what to do.

He timed the shot to hit just as the truck took the second curve, where the road dropped way off down the hill.

Crack!

Lowering the rifle, he pulled the NVGs down again. Adrenaline rushed through his system as he watched the truck go into a skid, tires screeching, the vehicle slewing this way and that before crashing into the guardrail.

Good. Good. Roll, you son of a bitch. Good riddance.

But the truck didn't roll. Somehow, whichever one of them was driving managed to get it under control and it came to a sliding stop just at the edge of the precipice.

Damn. Damn, damn, damn. How could that happen?

He cocked the rifle again and aimed.

Crack!

The windshield exploded under the impact with a satisfying sound. The truck skewed and fishtailed but was soon under control. Meaning he'd missed the driver. Damn, what a royal clusterfuck this was turning out to be. How could he be so stupid? How the hell had he misjudged this so badly?

He watched the Creed brothers get out of the truck, keeping low as they looked up and around. Trying to find the direction of the shot. Morgan, who Heartless knew was always armed, held a gun in his right hand as he crouched down by the front door of the cab. Could he risk another shot? No, damn it. This had to look like an accident.

Because I expected him to roll the damn truck like he did the last time. Only I forgot to allow for the fact he's not drinking anymore. Well, hell. Fucked again.

When both men seemed to focus in his direction, Heartless scrambled backward to where he'd parked his vehicle, at the tip of the road leading down the other side of the hill he was on. He could roll it a long way down without starting the engine and giving away his presence. He cracked open the rifle, unloaded the remaining ammunition and dropped it in his pocket. Then he put the rifle on the backseat. In a moment he was in his truck and moving noiselessly down the road.

Shit!

Everyone would be on edge now, on alert. What the hell was he supposed to do about that? How in the hell was he supposed to get rid of this problem before he was ruined? It wouldn't be much longer before Morgan Creed stuck his nose too far into where it shouldn't be and told Dallas everything. That just couldn't happen.

Make a better plan, that's what I need to do.

By the time he finally reached a place where he could turn on the headlights and start the engine, his mind was already working. When he hit the highway he had the beginnings of a plan forming in his mind.

Chapter One

One week later

I stood in the back of the Baker Amphitheater, leaning against the brick half-wall that separated the seats under the roof from those on the lawn, wondering for the hundredth time what the hell I was doing here. It wasn't that I'd never been to a concert before. I'd been to plenty, running security detail for high-profile musicians. But I'd never been to a Dallas Creed concert. A deliberate choice, one I'd stuck to until tonight. Morgan Creed, Dallas' brother, had given me a ticket to the performance with a seat right down front, but I didn't want to be that close to the man yet. Or give him a chance to see me.

When Dallas Creed and I destroyed our relationship twenty years ago, I stumbled away from it with my heart bleeding and swore never to lay eyes on him again. I had loved him with an intensity that consumed me and I'd been so sure he felt the same way. Then he dropped his bombshell, leaving me emotionally wiped out, with a bitter outlook on love and a determination never to be hurt again.

All these years I'd managed to hide behind an invisible wall, refusing to buy any Dallas Creed albums, as if by ignoring his music I could ignore the man. But his songs were played everywhere and television covered him like green on grass, so avoiding him completely had been next to impossible. It bothered me after a while to discover I actually *liked* listening to him. Despite that, I was definitely finished with the man. Over and done. *Finis*.

When he'd had his disastrous accident I hadn't even called to find out how he was, afraid to open old wounds and let my heart bleed all over the place again. The man was just plain poison to me. Or maybe we'd poisoned each other. I didn't know anymore; only knew that I'd survived by keeping my distance all these years. We'd been too obsessed with our own careers to care enough about each other to compromise. The blame was certainly not all his. In that secret place that I'd deliberately hidden away, I knew that. I was equally as guilty as him. It just made it easier for me to lay everything at his door.

Yet here I stood, waiting for the show to begin. I wondered not for the first time what had driven him to the excess of drugs and booze that led to the accident, and why he was so determined to put himself through the agony of the climb back to the top.

Stop!

I mentally shook myself. I didn't want to know and didn't care. Silently I repeated it over and over to myself, much as I had to Morgan Creed when he'd appeared in my office two days ago...

Just seeing him, with his close resemblance to his brother, was a kick in the stomach. Same dark blond hair, same smoky gray eyes, same lean build and loose-hipped walk. The smile was a little tighter, the eyes not quite as intense, but add a couple of years and it could have been Dallas standing in front of me.

Thank god it wasn't. I used every bit of my willpower not to affect an air of disdain.

"Whatever you're selling, I'm not interested."

"You've done very well for yourself," he commented, ignoring me and looking around at my surroundings. "I'm impressed. There aren't too many women who've reached this level in your business."

He was right about that. Roper Protective Services was my baby, probably the only one I'd ever have, and it had grown and prospered. My love life might suck but otherwise, I was great. In the central computer system was a file that gave the location and assignment of every agent at all times. Just outside the office door my secretary worked steadily, updating the current files. Down the hall, any operatives who weren't already on the road were planning for their next assignments and tying up loose ends from the last one.

Yes, I'd done well. I'd gotten the success I'd obsessively believed was so important. But had I paid too high a price? That was something I chose not to think about.

"You have a great reputation in the industry," Morgan went on. "You're known for providing the best security for iconic figures."

"Iconic?" I couldn't keep the sarcasm from my voice. "Exactly what does that mean?"

"You know damn well what it means, Charley. And you know you're the best."

"Thanks, but I don't think you came here to pay me a compliment." I fiddled with a pen on my desk, needing something to do with my hands. "I was shocked when I saw your name on the appointment schedule."

And that wasn't the only reaction I'd had. When I'd seen Morgan's name on the calendar it had reminded me of Dallas, a sharp sensation like a punch to the gut. It invaded my body, stirring up memories and emotions I'd worked so long to keep under lock and key.

"You could have called me and cancelled," he pointed out.

Which I probably should have. "The message said it was important."

He smiled, the same little boy smile Dallas had, the one the Creed brothers apparently never lost. My stomach knotted and my mouth went dry. No, no, no. Not after all this time. Would I never recover from my shattered heart? By sheer effort of will I managed to block Dallas' face from my mind.

"And you were curious about what I wanted."

I kept my face impassive. "Mildly."

"But not about Dallas," he added softly.

Yes! No! Go away, Morgan.

"My personal interest in Dallas Creed has long since disappeared. I don't want to know anything about him." I dropped the pen and picked up my coffee mug. Anything to keep Morgan from seeing just how much discussing Dallas unsettled me. "I have to say, though, he's certainly had a long ride."

Morgan nodded. "The majority of performers like him peak after five years, slide back down to appearing in clubs, then retire before people begin to feel sorry for them."

"But not Dallas."

He nodded. "But not Dallas. And I'll be goddamned if I can figure out why. Maybe because he's neither pure country nor pure rock. He crosses over, a very important thing in success in the music industry."

He paused.

"And?" I prompted.

"And...he's just got something...indefinable that takes him to the top and keeps him there. Not once but twice. Charley, he's bigger this time than he ever was."

I shrugged and sat up straighter. Why was I even listening to this? It killed me to realize that after twenty years, my emotions could still be so raw that just discussing Dallas made them bleed around the edges.

"Not my business. I'm just interested in why you might need my services. I thought all promoters had security."

"That's basically to keep people from rushing the stage and weird things like that." I couldn't mistake the tension in his voice. "Or keep a lid on the groupies."

I made a rude noise. "That must not go over very big. Keeping the groupies away."

The look Morgan shot me was hard but he didn't comment. Instead he walked to the big window and stood there, hands in his pockets. When he finally spoke again, I had to work hard to conceal my shock at what he said. The very last thing I'd expected him to tell me was that someone was trying to kill Dallas. That there had already been three attempts and he was getting threatening notes as well.

"Kill Dallas?" I still couldn't wrap my mind around it. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack."

"But who would want to kill him? He's just a..."

"Singer? Performer?" He turned to look at me. "When you reach that level of fame there's always someone out there making you a target. Failed wannabes. Discarded groupies. Someone with an imagined slight."

"Why not just report it to the police?" I asked.

"Because I have no one to point the finger at. No place for them to dig. And it would just throw the tour into chaos."

"Oh yes." I couldn't keep the tinge of bitterness from my voice. "Let's be sure nothing happens to the tour."

It was a resentful thing to say, a leftover from long ago, and I hoped I didn't sound like all the discarded women I'd met over the years. But Morgan didn't seem to notice. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

"Look, Charley. We've got only four more dates left on this tour after the one in San Antonio. Then I can take him home and hide him at the ranch. Meanwhile, I need someone to be with Dallas 24/7, so no one can get to him. Who can provide security no matter where he is. Someone who can also dig into why this is happening. Like I said, Roper Protective Services has a reputation for being the best."

Give Dallas Creed that kind of protection? The man who still starred in the erotic fantasies that crowded my mind despite my best efforts to banish them? Whose music seemed to follow me wherever I went? Not even on the coldest day in hell.

I walked over to the credenza and poured more coffee into my mug, giving myself a chance to collect my scattered thoughts. "I don't think so, Morgan. You just wasted your time coming here."

"But I told you, Charlotte," he objected, "I want the best, and that's you."

"You won't get it by calling me Charlotte," I snapped. I'd hated that name all my life.

He chuckled. "Touchy, touchy. I thought your professional status demanded that formality. But okay, no problem, *Charley*." His face sobered. "However, we both know you *are* the best and I won't risk my brother's life on second-rate help."

"There are a lot of—"

"No." The sharp protest cut me off. "I want *you*."

My immediate thought was, *well, you can't have me*.

"Why?" I was curious. "Do the attempts on his life have something to do with you being along on the tour? You never did it before."

"Not exactly." He shoved his hands in his pockets and walked to the window. "There's a lot you don't know, and I'm not going to tell you unless you take this gig." He turned back toward me. "So what's it going to be?"

"First of all, if you don't find out who's behind this, the minute he's out in public again he becomes a target. And tell me again, why haven't you gone to the police?"

"And tell them what? We *think* someone shot at him? We *think* someone's after him?" Morgan sounded disgusted. "That's why I'm here. You can investigate and you can protect him." He paused. "Come on, Charley. No matter how you feel, you can't hate him enough to just hang him out there to dry."

I fiddled with my coffee mug again, wishing my pulse would quit trying to hammer through my veins.

"How about this," he suggested. "I've got a ticket with me for tomorrow night's concert. Why don't you just go and take a peek? You might even have a good time. Then we'll talk. Will you do that much?"

Of course, the moment he left my office I'd done something I promised myself I'd never do—go online and dig for every scrap of information I could find on Dallas Creed. I read about the explosion of his fame, the lavish lifestyle, the women, the drugs and booze. And of course the accident. There was little coverage of his recovery but when Sawyer Black, his manager, announced a contract for a new CD and a promotional tour, the media coverage picked up.

I learned that his fans had flocked to him again in droves, his CDs were number-one sellers and he had most of his original band back together. Printing everything out, I'd stuck it in a folder in the bottom drawer of my desk. If I decided not to take this job, I'd shred it and Dallas Creed would be out of my life for good.

So here I was, waiting for my first glimpse of the man on a stage since he and his pickup band played the Raccoon Saloon all those years ago. It was time to find out if I'd actually managed to wipe Dallas Creed out of my system. If bottling up my emotions and using other men to wipe away traces and memories of him had worked at all.

The night had a magical quality to it, a perfect Texas night with stars blinking against a black velvet sky. A very soft breeze stirred the air, chasing away the last heat of the day. The sense of expectancy in the outdoor concert facility was nearly palpable. Anticipation fairly zapped through the air like bolts of energy. I could even feel it myself, the kind of feeling you got on Christmas morning when you ran downstairs, or when you were right on the brink of the most outstanding orgasm you'd ever had. Seventy-five hundred people moved restlessly in their seats in front of me. An almost equal amount were spread out on the rise of the hill behind me, drinking and staring at the stage with binoculars, even though at the moment there was nothing to see. They were all waiting for the same thing.

The curtain was drawn across the stage, heightening the edge of expectancy. Especially for me, much as I hated to admit it. What was behind there? What was his band like now after they'd tasted success once and were back on top with him again?

I could feel the energy sizzling through the crowd. Well, why not? If nothing else, Dallas Creed had always had an electric presence. Add in the staging, his suck-my-tongue voice and the electricity of his music and you had a knockout winner.

The soft notes of a viola floated in the air from behind the curtain, joined immediately by violins, and I wondered *what the hell?* Violins? Then I realized it was a synthesizer. And obviously a damn good musician coaxing music from it. The sound that mimicked violins seemed to hold the audience in thrall, as if they were expectantly awaiting a grand moment. The music built and built as the magician behind the synthesizer added the full-throated sounds of woodwinds and the rich tones and powerful chords of an organ, swelling to a crescendo. The last note held and held and held, flowing out into the crowd, pulling at us as if to say, *Wait for it, it's coming.*

Then I heard the familiar first downstroke of the rhythm guitars as they began the intro to the first song. The curtain drew back slowly to reveal the band onstage, the bass guitar and keyboards now adding their voices, the drums accenting them with a syncopated beat.

All sound ended abruptly and the crowd stilled for a breathless moment. The band launched into a rich intro to one of Dallas' hits, an upbeat tune called *Cowboys Do It Right*, a song I realized the synthesizer had laid the foundation for. The spotlight came up and the man himself jogged onto the stage.

To my dismay, my traitorous heart tripped at the sight of him and an emotion I refused to name clogged my throat. Dallas Creed was definitely a lot older, forty-three to the twenty-three he'd been the last time I saw him in person. Newspaper photos had kept me up with his aging process, but no picture could do justice to the energy still radiating from this man. The energy that had drawn me to him in the first place.

And damn it. I still wanted him as badly as I had years ago. Wanted his hands on me, stroking my body. His mouth on my breasts, sucking them and nipping them the way he used to, the way that drove me so wild. His cock inside me, thrusting in and out with slow, powerful strokes, coaxing me from one orgasm to the next.

Hell and damnation.

I stared at him across the audience as hard as I could, wishing now I had binoculars. But even from this distance I could see his blond hair had darkened to a rich honey color and was definitely longer, brushing the collar of his shirt. And his deep tan was hard to miss, probably a result of the two years spent at the ranch. I couldn't see his smoky gray eyes or the details of his face but I knew there had to be lines there that high living and tragedy had etched into the tanned skin. He was leaner than I remembered and when he moved there was just the slight favoring of the left leg, the one torn up in the accident.

But he still wore the same denim jeans and western-cut shirt, his feet shod in what had to be custom-made boots.

He waved at the audience, acknowledging the thunderous applause, strapped on his guitar and launched into the song in that familiar deep, raspy voice that made my womb clench and my heart trip in its beat. Immediately twenty years fell away and I was back on a blanket on the bank of Mistletoe Creek in Dunham, Texas.

* * * * *

Twenty years earlier

The sky was as black as onyx, making the stars and the half moon stand out with startling clarity. I lay back on the blanket Dallas had brought from the pickup, my head pillowed on his rolled-up jacket. The heat of the day had faded and all around us cicadas sang homage to the night breeze, sweet, familiar music.

The wine we'd brought was nearly gone, the headiness of it making me almost giddy. Dallas lay stretched out beside me, head propped up on one hand while the other one moved in warm circles on my tummy beneath my t-shirt.

"Your skin is like satin," he murmured. "I love to touch it."

He bent his head and kissed me, softly at first but then with greater insistency, his tongue pushing into my mouth and dancing to some silent symphony across my palate and my own tongue. I reached up and threaded my fingers into the rich silk of his blond hair, lightened from hours in the sun, a contrast to his darkly tanned skin.

"And I love kissing you," he murmured when he lifted his head slightly. "The inside of your mouth is like liquid velvet."

My body pulsed as it always did at his words. He had such a way with them, smooth and lyrical. All his life, it seemed, music and writing songs had been Dallas' main hobby, his talent with words a natural thing. Every minute he could scrounge from his work on the family ranch, he was writing and picking out tunes on his guitar. Sometimes we would come out here to this very spot and I'd lie beside him while he created melodies. I had my very own troubadour.

His lips descended on mine again, his tongue now insistent as it plundered my mouth. His hand crept up to cup my breasts in turn, taking their weight and lightly pinching the nipples through the satin of my bra. I moaned into his mouth and suddenly the bra was gone, the front clasp easily opened, and Dallas was cradling the bare skin in his warm palms. Thumb and forefinger squeezed each nipple lightly, one then the other, teasing them to painful hardness.

He leaned against me and the thickness of his cock pressed against my thigh through the worn denim of his jeans. I moved my leg, rubbing against him, and he groaned into my mouth.

"Jesus, Charley." His voice was rough with need. "It seems all we have to do is touch each other and I'm ready to go off." He traced my lips with his tongue. "But don't you worry, darlin'. I'm taking you with me."

He lifted my t-shirt and closed his lips around one of my nipples. Sensations rocketed through me, stabbing me with a pleasure so sweet and sharp it made me gasp. I always teased Dallas by telling him he had an educated mouth, but it was the plain truth. I arched up to him, urging him to suck harder, and let my hand drift down to the crotch of his jeans.

"Careful," he whispered against my skin. "I'm riding the edge of control as it is."

"But I like to touch you as much as you like to touch me." I could barely breathe. "Please, Dallas." And I meant it. I loved to feel the length and thickness of his cock, the velvety skin over hard steel, the flared head so plump and soft, always with its little drop of moisture at the slit that let me know how ready he was for me.

"Just a warning," he told me as he moved to my other nipple, his hand kneading my aching breast.

Despite the fog of desire closing in on me, I managed to slide a hand down to unzip his fly and slip my hand through his boxers to the warm flesh lying there that I loved to feel. My cream soaked my crotch as I closed my fingers around the hot steel of his cock.

"I'll bet you're wet as the creek." Dallas unsnapped my shorts, lowered the zipper and snaked his hand beneath my panties, down to my cunt. His fingers gently brushed my curls and probed my slit, stopping to rim the opening of my vagina.

"Oh god." I spread my legs as wide as I could and lifted my hips, urging him to push his fingers deeper, harder.

He toyed with my clit, rubbing his thumb back and forth and pinching it lightly with his fingers until the climax grabbed me, swift and hard. Dallas manipulated my sensitive and swollen nub as my vaginal muscles quivered and my honey poured from me. But I knew he was far from done.

Even as he tensed under the gentle strokes of my hand, he slid two fingers inside me, then three, and began the insistent in-and-out stroke that drove me up the spiral again. I'd barely caught my breath before the next orgasm gripped me. I squeezed my thighs around his hand and rode his fingers to completion, little sounds of pleasure echoing in the back of my throat.

As I lay there gasping, Dallas stripped my shorts and panties down and tossed them to the side. In an instant he'd shucked his own clothes, fished a condom from his jeans pocket, rolled it on and knelt between my thighs.

Lifting me with his hand beneath my buttocks, he lapped at my cunt with slow strokes of his tongue before positioning his cock at my opening.

"I love you, Charley." His voice was hoarse and thick.

"I love you too," I whispered.

He drove into me with a strong thrust of his hips and my muscles clamped down on him at once. He held himself still for a moment, staring into my eyes. I wondered if he could see into my soul. I was sure I could see into his.

When he moved it was with the slow, measured rhythm I was so used to. In, out, in, out, until I wanted to scream at him to hurry. I wrapped my legs around him and dug my heels into the small of his back, lifting myself into his thrusts. Urging him to a greater tempo.

His body tightened and his pace increased. Harder, faster. More, more, more. Then I felt his big, lean body tense. He threw his head back and screamed my name as he spurted into the condom and I spasmed around him again and again, my whole body shaking with the intensity of our shared release.

At last he collapsed on me, his sweat-slickened skin pasted to mine as if we'd just made the most permanent connection. And as far as I was concerned, we had.

* * * * *

A hand touched my shoulder, startling me and bringing me back to the present.

Some bodyguard I'd make if I keep drifting off into memories.

A familiar voice whispered in my ear, "I figured I'd find you back here at the edge of the audience. Afraid to get too close, Charley?"

I spared a quick glance for Morgan. Again I had the uncomfortable feeling that I was standing close to Dallas, once removed. The brothers were too damn similar for my peace of mind. "Aren't you supposed to be hovering near the Great One's side?"

"I'm going right back there. Just came to see if you showed." He nodded toward the stage. "How do you like it so far?"

What could I say? That the boy had grown up into an incredible man? That the tendril of fear I was being caught up in told me to run as far and as fast as I could? That apparently the magic of Dallas Creed could still draw me in? Damn it, anyway.

I wet my lips, hating the fact that I was mesmerized by the performance onstage.

"He really needs you, Charley." Morgan's mouth was still close to my ear so I could hear him over the music. "He'd be the last to admit it, and I'll probably have as hard a time convincing him to do this as I am with you. But if you still feel anything for him at all, please take this job."

Then he was gone, leaving me to watch the rest of the performance and try to get my raging emotions and galloping hormones under control.

The lead guitars and the piano played the first notes of the finale, *Take Me Home*, and the crowd was on its feet, clapping and swaying in time to the rhythm. And despite my determination to remain detached, chills raced along my skin. For a moment I was back in one of the Texas honky-tonks where Dallas and his band scrounged gigs on weekends, belting out songs he'd written in secret.

Take me home, little darlin'

Give me shelter in your arms

A place of love and peace

Where there's no chance of harm.

The power of the performance surged through the air in palpable waves. I even found myself caught up in it. Dallas Creed might be older and partly broken, but his voice that even when he was younger could conjure up the most erotic feelings had only grown richer and deeper. The slightly husky quality just enhanced the pure magic of it. And lit fires under emotions I'd thought dead and buried.

Take me home, tell me you love me,

The way that I love you

Warm my body and my heart

That's what I need from you.

I wanted to run from this place, find my car in the massive parking lot and drive like hell until I'd outrun my demons. But deep in my soul, I knew I wouldn't do it. Otherwise I'd have torn the ticket from Morgan into little pieces and never shown up at the amphitheater.

I love you, little darlin', more love than

I've ever known

*So let's be alone together
Tonight...take me home.*

I felt unwelcome tears prick my eyelids. Me, the woman who, these days, thought of emotions as a disease. His voice was stronger now, the essence of it so much more mature. How had I missed such talent back then? Missed what he was really meant to do? But I knew the answer. I'd been so involved in *plans*—plans for my career, for his, for our future. A future I simply created without really talking to him about it. Assumptions can just kill you.

The song built to its amazing finish, the rhythm guitars and the strong bass emphasized by the pounding drumbeat, until they reached the final chord, the final notes. Dallas tilted his head back, arm raised upward, and suddenly everything stilled. He removed his guitar and set it on a stand, then bowed his head to the audience. Noise erupted like fireworks, the crowd cheering and whistling and stamping its feet, and screaming his name.

The sheer stage magnetism of the man and the incredible quality of his music would have stirred a dead person. I had clapped along with the others, tapping my foot to the beat. I was breathless, despite my intention not to be affected.

He bowed his head once more then waved to the crowd as he jogged back to the wings. I noticed he skipped his usual walk along the edge of the stage to shake the hands of those who'd crowded their way up there. A safety feature, I was sure. I was also sure it was Morgan who'd insisted on it.

The crowd stayed on its feet, the applause resonating, the band playing the chorus over and over until the house lights came up and they finally realized Dallas Creed was done for the night. The entire performance had been amazing. Polished. Electric. Emotional. The adjectives piled up on top of each other in my head and still they missed the mark. Dallas Creed had a magic you didn't get with practice. It came from inside the soul. Why hadn't I seen it all those years ago?

But now the show was over and I had to shake myself back from the magical place to which he had transported his fans. And make a decision. I leaned against the half-wall, waiting for the crowd to dissipate, trying to sort out my own emotions. A security guard pushed through the outgoing mob and headed toward me.

"Ms. Roper?"

I nodded.

"Morgan Creed asked that I bring you to his brother's trailer." He pointed behind him. "I have a golf cart with me."

Well, Charley? Fish or cut bait.

Willing my nerves to take a rest, I nodded. "Let's go."

Chapter Two

Dallas changed into shorts and a t-shirt after his performance, handing his clothes to the wardrobe guy who'd get them cleaned, along with those of the band members. After two intense hours onstage beneath hot lights, he was sweaty and drained. Each performance reminded him he wasn't as young as he had been the first time around. And while his leg was in the best shape he could make it, after standing on it for two hours and moving around as he did, he felt the familiar ache in the bone and muscle.

He raked his hands through his hair, still unfamiliar with its new, longer length, and pulled a small bottle of orange juice from the cooler against one wall. The band members and roadies would have beer in their trailers—he no longer allowed hard liquor at any events—and no drugs. These days Dallas stuck completely to the orange juice, his long-time favorite. Three years clean of everything now. Older and hopefully not too late to be wiser. It had taken a year of battles, months of pain and a lot of soul searching to find the will to make things better, but he was finally, after too much time, feeling good about himself.

Tilting his head back, he chugged half the drink then dropped into a big armchair and put his feet up on the ottoman. His leg bothered him, but each day it got a little better. The first concert out he'd been ready to bag it after six songs. But he'd gritted his teeth and made it through. Did his exercises each day with Morgan the warden looking on. And now the pain was little more than a dull ache.

He didn't wear shorts when other people were around, opting instead for jeans or sweats. The scars on his leg, although fading, were still noticeable. In the accident jagged pieces of metal and plastic had shredded his leg and seven surgeries had added their own marks. Now a network of white lines crisscrossed the skin, some thinner than others. All of them still ugly enough to make him self-conscious. Still reminding him of his arrogant stupidity. But tonight there was just himself, Morgan and his manager, Sawyer Black. He'd given all his interviews that afternoon, chatting with one last reporter as the golf cart had taken him to the stage. Todd Mullins was overseeing the breakdown of the equipment and then loading it onto the truck. He'd make sure the bus was ready and get all the band members on it. At last it was time to unwind.

There was food on a table near him, healthy food. Morgan's choice, of course. And no peanuts. The promoters and caterers always had specific written instructions. A near-fatal episode with peanut butter when he was six had made the family aware of his extreme allergy to peanuts. Only his father's speed-breaking drive to the hospital emergency room had saved him. He still carried an epi pen at all times. Just in case. And Morgan always combed the food carefully wherever they were just to be sure.

But at any rate, tonight he was still too hyped-up to eat. Still hadn't come down from the high the performance gave him. It continued to amaze him how alive he felt without the effects of alcohol and drugs. How had he been foolish enough to think they gave him an edge, when in fact they took it away?

Sawyer, in his usual outfit of western-cut suit and hand-tooled boots, was in a corner talking on his cell phone. His Southern drawl thickening the way it always did when he was coaxing someone or smoothing something over. The man had taken to wearing his black hair a little too long and his suits cut a little too tight for the weight he'd recently packed on, but hell. As long as he paid attention to details what did it matter?

Dallas wondered, not for the first time, why he'd let Sawyer talk him into this tour. All he'd wanted to do was record. But Sawyer had been excited about the new material, so much so that he'd finessed Dallas into agreeing to the concerts. He knew Sawyer had his professional welfare at the top of his list and he got things done in a very efficient and effective manner. He also couldn't deny that the man was sharper than the famous Colonel Tom Parker. He'd made Dallas an icon rivaling the legendary Elvis once and was in the process of doing it again.

Maybe.

Morgan sprawled on the couch, making notes on a legal pad. Dallas swallowed a grin. When Morgan had shown up at his hospital bed after the first surgery, every emotion carefully masked, and said he was taking him back to the ranch, Dallas had been shocked. They hadn't even spoken in five years, yet there his brother stood as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

"How'd you find out?" he'd croaked, his throat raw from the breathing tube.

"You're big news, bro," Morgan told him, only a slight edge of anger in his voice. "Just in case you didn't know it. Word of the accident's all over the place."

"You actually mean to take me home with you?" Dallas just hadn't been able to process that.

Morgan had made a show of looking around the hospital room. "I don't see anyone else lining up for the job. Anyway, family's family, no matter what. So just shut up and let me handle things."

Dallas had never dreamed his brother would eventually turn the operation of his ranch over to his foreman to road trip with Dallas and the band. But he knew why, and he was grateful every day. The accident had done more than shatter his leg. It had shattered the wall between the brothers and forged a new bond.

He was just finishing his drink when a knock sounded on the door.

Dallas frowned. They weren't expecting anyone, so who the hell could it be? Sawyer would meet with the promoter to verify the gate receipts and the merchandise sales. Todd would still be busy with the equipment. The reporters were all taken care of.

Morgan opened the door a crack and nodded his head.

Jesus, Dallas thought, *not bad news. Please.* Not when his life was finally turning around.

Then he remembered—and he felt as if a huge spotlight was suddenly focused on his ruined leg. How had he forgotten she was coming? His stomach cramped and he wanted a place to hide. But Morgan stepped back, opening the door wider, and Dallas was frozen in place, watching his past walk into the room.

He wasn't prepared for her effect on him. Privately he'd followed her career—the years at the FBI, then a long stint with the Hillcroft Group, and finally opening her own agency, Roper Protective Services. In all these years they hadn't spoken or seen each other, but the moment she stepped into the room his body reacted. His cock stiffened, his mouth went dry and his balls tingled as he experienced the familiar impact her body always had on him.

Great.

He shifted in his chair, making sure his dark t-shirt covered the growing bulge behind his fly.

He'd dreamed about this moment, fantasized about it. With every new hit tune, every sold-out concert appearance, he wanted her there so he could show her what she'd missed. Wanted to make her eat her words. Wanted her to see the success he'd become. The success they could have shared.

The accident had changed all that. Made him take a good hard look at his life, at what he wanted and where he'd been going. With death flirting with him, he'd finally had to admit to himself everything was hollow without her. Years ago he'd tried to make a point with her but who had he proven it to? Certainly not himself.

He studied her as she moved fluidly into the trailer and stood to the side, next to Morgan.

Charley Roper had aged much better than he had. Her body was still slim although rounded in all the appropriate places, but now it was highly toned. Jeans hugged her legs and the soft material of her blouse draped over high breasts. Her rich, thick brown hair was still the same lustrous sable color pulled back into a no-nonsense ponytail. Her face certainly didn't show the wear that his did, but her clear blue eyes reflected a bitter wisdom that bothered him. And she still gave off the same go-to-hell attitude with her walk and the way she stood almost defiantly in front of him, hands stuffed into the front pockets of her jeans.

Her familiar scent teased at his nostrils, giving rise to a wealth of memories. He remembered how that body felt beneath his, all soft and pliant. How those full lips felt on his mouth or wrapped around his cock.

His hands curled as he fought the urge to reach out and touch her. After all these years she still had the power to steal his breath. He knew if the two of them were alone in this room he'd have her naked and under him in seconds. His muscles tightened, his cock hardened even more and he was back to that last defining night.

* * * * *

Twenty years earlier

The apartment was small but at least it was private and it got him out of the dorm. As a junior, he was fed up with sharing his living space with dozens of strangers and trying to find secluded places to be with Charley. Football season was over, he was through nursing bumps and bruises, and he had his girl in his arms. He hoped she'd still be there when he told her what he'd decided. But first they had other business together.

She laid beneath him, gloriously naked, her rosy nipples pebbled and swollen from his mouth working them. His cock was so hard he was sure if he banged it against the wall it would break and splinter. He wanted inside her more than he wanted his next breath.

He'd spent a long time sucking her nipples and bringing her to climax with his fingers and mouth on her delicious pussy. He wondered if he'd ever get enough of it. Or if he'd ever have the chance to taste it again after tonight.

Unable to wait any longer, he grabbed the condom from the nightstand and ripped it open with his teeth. Charley took it from him and used her slender fingers to roll it onto his throbbing erection. Just her soft touch nearly sent him over the edge. He gritted his teeth until the latex sheath was in place, then slid his hands beneath her wonderful ass, lifted her to him and plunged inside until she'd taken him completely.

As always he waited, giving her time to adjust to him. It continued to amaze him that no matter how often they fucked, she was still so tight she could squeeze the breath out of him. He felt the muscles of her pussy clamp down on him now, gripping him.

Oh Jesus! Could heaven be any better than this?

He looked down at her, face flushed from the orgasms he'd already given her with his fingers and tongue, eyes glittering with desire. He drank in the sight, imprinting it on his brain, just in case this was all he'd ever have after tonight.

Drawing in a breath, he set up a steady rhythm, rolling his hips as he drove in and out of her tight, wet cunt. Out, then all the way in to the hilt. Again. Again. He tried to slow it down but he was way past that point. The moment he felt the first spasms in the walls of her pussy, he ramped up his tempo, jack-hammering into her as if it would cost him his life to stop.

They hit the crest together, his body tightening as he spurted into the latex over and over, the walls of Charley's cunt gripping him like a wet fist. She shook beneath him as he threw back his head and growled her name, clinging to him as if he was the only anchor on earth.

When he collapsed forward he wasn't sure whose breath came harder or whose heart beat louder. He stayed inside her for a long time, until his cock softened and he

knew he had to get rid of the condom before they bought trouble. He kissed her before slowly pulling out and heading for the bathroom, where he took care of business.

He padded to the tiny kitchenette and pulled two beers from the fridge, popping the caps and carrying them back to the bed. Propping himself up against the pillows, he handed a bottle to Charley then finished half of his without stopping. It wasn't just that sex drained him of energy. He needed a little liquid courage to tell her what he was going to do. While he searched for the right way to begin, she gave him the opening he needed.

"Now that football season's over," she pointed out, snuggling against him, "we'll have more time together. Think of what we can do with it."

Dallas took another swallow of beer. "Yeah, about that."

She sat upright against him, holding her beer with two hands. "What do you mean, 'about that'? Is there something I don't know? Are you taking more classes? Playing another sport?"

"Well, actually..."

She reached over and set her drink on the nightstand, then turned to him. "Actually what? What's this about, Dallas? What are you trying to tell me? You know you can just spit it out."

His stomach cramped as he tried to get the words out. He'd been going along with everything because it had just seemed easier but he'd finally hit a stone wall. He had to say his piece and pray for the best.

They'd been together since her junior year in high school, his first in college. Although they'd known each other long before that. Nights when they lay in each other's arms and talked about their plans for the future. At least Charley talked about them, all wrapped up in a nice, neat package. He knew her dream was law enforcement. The FBI if she could get in. It consumed her. She saw it as homage to her brother, Will. Her hero, ten years older and a crack FBI agent, killed in the line of duty. She'd been devastated when that happened and dedicated herself to following in his footsteps. Be as good as he was. That was her total career goal.

"You know how important this is to me," she'd told Dallas over and over again.

With his agricultural degree, she kept pointing out, Dallas would go back to the family ranch and run it with his brother, Morgan. Build up the herd again, get into the breeding business once more. Make it a centerpiece of their ranching community. She'd ask for assignment to the San Antonio field office, they'd get married and...

And what?

When had she asked what *he* really wanted? Did she even read the signals?

He drained the rest of his beer. "Charley, you know how I've been playing on weekends with this band some guys and I put together?"

He watched her closely for any indication that she'd picked up on how special his music was but he might have been talking about two other people.

"Of course I know. Aren't I the one sitting at the front table watching you, cowboy?" Her voice had the soft, after-sex sultry sound, only now with a little edge to it.

"Well..."

Get it out, asshole. Just say it and be done with it.

"Me and the guys... That is, we... That is I... Charley, I'm not coming back to school in January. The guys and I are going to try to make it."

There. He'd said it. His entire body tensed as he watched her, dreading her reaction.

"Make it?" She turned so she was facing him. "Make what?"

"You know. Make it as a band. On the road."

In the silence that followed he waited for the explosion. It wasn't long in coming.

"Are you crazy?" She jumped off the bed and began pacing, totally ignoring the fact she was still completely naked. "Go on the road and play dives and beer joints? Scratch for nickels and dimes?"

"Charley, listen—"

"Don't you 'Charley' me." She stopped beside the bed, arms folded beneath her breasts.

He had a hard time keeping his eyes off her body and his mind focused on the conversation.

"What about our plans?" she asked. "What about Morgan? It's just been the two of you for a long time now. You know he's counted on you coming home to run the ranch with him."

"Charley, listen to me," he pleaded. "I don't know any other way to say this, but I'm not a cowboy. Not a rancher. I've been writing music for a long time. The band and I work well together, and I've just got to take this shot at it." He narrowed his eyes. "You could come with me, you know."

She threw up her hands. "Then both of us would be working for pennies. Get real, Dallas. I have a career ahead of me. And so would you if you'd get your head out of your ass. Music is a great hobby, but—"

"Hobby? You think it's a fucking hobby?" Anger fueled the adrenaline pumping through his system. "Maybe if you paid attention to something besides creating a shrine to your brother, you might have seen—"

She whirled on him, anger rising up inside her like a blazing fire. "Don't you *dare* say a word about my brother. Not a word."

They argued for an hour. He cajoled and pleaded with her, but her anger just kept rising to a fever pitch. He was shocked that his idea had triggered such rage inside her, blowing away all reason. Finally she pulled on her jeans and t-shirt, picked up her purse and yanked open the apartment door.

"You want to go throw your life away? Fine, but don't take me with you."

The door slammed behind her. He spent the next two weeks calling her, tracking her down, trying to get her alone to talk to her. But Charley Roper always had been a stubborn piece of work. When she closed a door it stayed shut.

They hadn't seen each other since then.

* * * * *

Dallas set his empty juice bottle down on the table next to him. He wished now he'd thrown on a pair of jeans, but there were his scars, out in the open for Charley Roper to see. If he saw pity in her eyes he wouldn't be able to stand it. He was sorry now he'd agreed to this meeting. If he'd been able to get out of the way, he'd have stormed into the trailer's bedroom. But he was trapped by the two people standing in front of him. And the damn fucking chemistry that had always been so volatile between him and Charley bubbled up from the dark place where he'd hidden it.

Shit!

The two of them stared at each other for a long moment, eyes locked in some unknown contest of wills. Dallas couldn't speak. His words all seemed jammed in his throat. Finally Charley broke the silence.

"I want you to know this wasn't my idea." She pulled her hands out of her pockets and folded her arms across her breasts, standing defiantly facing him. "Morgan came to me."

Dallas managed to find his voice. "It wasn't mine either. Just so you know."

Morgan stepped forward. "I take the blame for this. All of it. Dallas, we have a problem and what we're doing isn't working. I'm not taking chances with your life."

"And there wasn't anyone else to go to?" Dallas could barely keep the sarcasm out of his voice.

"Not someone I can trust. Someone who'll put your interests before everything else."

His gut twisted. Would she really do that? After everything...

"You must be Charlotte Roper." Sawyer snapped his cell phone shut, put it in his pocket and walked over to where the three of them were facing off. "Morgan's told me about you."

"Call me Charley. Please."

Dallas watched them shake hands. So Morgan had briefed Sawyer about this too. Of course. The guy was his manager, however much Morgan disliked him personally.

"I have to say up front, I'm not too happy that he went behind my back on this," he told her. "These decisions are usually mine, although Morgan and I seem to disagree about some of that. We've had this discussion before, right, Morgan?"

"I wanted the best." Morgan's voice had a harsh edge to it.

"Let's hope that's what we got," Sawyer said. "I'll assume Morgan's briefed you on our situation here?"

She nodded. "I still think the local police should have been called but we're obviously past that. Not that there's much they could have done anyway, I guess."

"We need to handle all of this with the utmost discretion. I'm sure you can understand that. If you're as good as your publicity, you should be able to handle everything, right?" He looked at Morgan and back at Charley. "My first concern, of course, is for Dallas and his safety. Does your visit here tonight mean you're taking the contract?"

Dallas waited for her reaction. Sawyer Black had a well-deserved reputation in the business as a shark, and he'd certainly done well with Dallas' career. Still, it was a tossup whether or not Charley could get past the over-the-top personality and if the two of them would butt heads if she took on the case. *If* she took it on.

"Maybe. We'll see."

"All right then. Dallas, I'm going to wind things up with the promoter. You're going back to the hotel with Morgan, right?"

Dallas nodded. "Just like I do every night."

"Okay. Charley, I hope to have you on our team. Morgan, let me know what happens. I'll be on my cell."

He closed the door as he went out and Morgan clicked the lock behind him.

"I still don't like that man," he told his brother. "And I don't think he likes me keeping such a tight rein on the finances this time."

"Sawyer will do whatever he has to in order to make this tour succeed."

"I just don't want you to end up like before," Morgan insisted.

"Why don't we change the subject? We can argue about our personal business another time." He stared at Charley. "So why did you come tonight?"

"Nice to see you too, Dallas." Her tone was thick with sarcasm and had a sharp edge to it. Well, what did he expect? "I see life is treating you well."

"Enjoy the show? Pretty good, huh? Oh wait." Her words still echoed at him after all these years. "If I remember right, this kind of stuff isn't worth your time."

"Can we sit down and behave like adults?" Morgan interrupted. "This was my idea, Dallas, and you agreed to at least meet with Charley. She wasn't any more eager for this than you but she's here, so do me a favor and just listen before you pull out your nasty side."

Dallas looked at him then at Charley, swallowed the retort he was ready to spit out and sat back down in his chair. He saw Charley's eyes flick to his leg, then lift to his face. He expected pity, the same look he saw in everyone else's eyes. He almost wished it was. Instead, the condemnation for his stupidity couldn't have been more obvious if she'd been wearing a sign.

"Charley?" Morgan gestured toward the couch. "Have a seat. Please. Would you like a cold drink?"

She sat stiffly on the edge of the couch. "No thanks. Let's get this over with."

Morgan sighed. "Fine." He looked at his brother. "Dallas, someone's tried to kill you three times. They've sent you threatening notes. Your hotel room at the last stop was trashed. The incidents are escalating, and the Sunday soldiers the promoters provide aren't doing the job. I told you before. You need protection 24/7 and you need the best."

Dallas forced himself to sit still, not to clench his fists or show his agitation in any way. He knew Morgan was right, they needed someone, but he wasn't sure if it would work with Charley or not. Could they put their history behind them and act as if this would be nothing more than a business arrangement?

He'd be a lot happier if just seeing her again hadn't given him an instant hard-on. It was a good thing his t-shirt was big and dark, covering a multitude of sins. How many nights had he lain in bed remembering Charley's naked body under his, his cock pounding into her as her flesh milked him and she bathed him in her hot liquid? After all this time he could still feel the imprint of her hard nipples on his chest, the soft fullness of her breasts.

He had to fight an overwhelming urge to throw her down on the couch and strip her naked, tasting every inch of the body that had been denied him for so long.

"I *am* the best," she said now, defiantly. "Roper Protective Services has clients all over the world and I can provide excellent references if you need them. But I'm not so sure this could work."

Dallas had wanted to say it first; get his licks in. Be sure the wall was still in place. Then he realized how childish he was being. But damn it. From the moment she'd walked through that door, he'd wanted her with a desire so powerful it surged through his entire body. Twenty years and a world of differences hadn't diminished his feelings for her one bit.

"At least hear me out," Morgan said, looking from one to the other.

He might have been speaking to both of them but Dallas knew his brother was speaking directly to him.

"Fine." He leaned back in his chair, resting the ankle of his injured leg on his other knee.

"Fine," Charley echoed. She made her face blank but Dallas could imagine what she was feeling inside.

Morgan positioned himself so he could see both of them as he spoke. He held up three fingers and began counting down, bending one finger.

"One. At the shakedown performance we did in a concert club Dallas' mic shorted out when he touched it. He barely got his hand away in time to avoid being shocked. Or worse, electrocuted."

He bent the second finger.

"Two. Todd Mullins always has someone set out Dallas' stage clothes, including his boots, either in the dressing room or, if it's an outdoor concert, in the bedroom of the trailer. It's a good thing Dallas always turns his boots upside down and shakes them before putting them on. An old habit from living on a ranch. Ten days ago one of them had a snake in it."

"A snake?"

"Yeah. Can you believe it?"

"That means it's someone close to him who can get to his stuff. And isn't afraid of reptiles. Although if you've lived in the Southwest for any length of time you sort of get used to the slimy creatures."

Morgan nodded and pressed the third finger down. "Three. He was at the ranch before we came here, working on some new material. We decided to drive into town after dinner. Nothing unusual. He did it every now and then, just to get out of the house. Sometimes I went with him. Like that night—when someone shot out the windshield on a bad curve when we were driving from the ranch into town. Dallas was behind the wheel. Good thing he's not drinking anymore or he'd never have been able to control the vehicle. Not at night on the winding road."

He looked from Dallas to Charley. "That enough attempts for someone to take it seriously?"

Charley was the first to speak. "I'm going to assume the police were called after each incident?"

"Only the windshield incident. The rest could easily be explained as accidents." He shook his head. "And this one they tried to chalk off to poachers at night with a bad aim."

Dallas knew they were all acutely aware of the prevalence of poachers in ranch country.

"I have copies of the police report for you to read," he told her.

"If I take this on," she reminded him.

"If you take this on."

"What kind of security do you have now?" she asked.

"At the ranch, everyone rides armed and we put in a new, state-of-the-art alarm system." He gave Dallas a stern look. "Despite my brother's pigheadedness, I also make him use the ranch truck if he has an obsessive desire to go anywhere when he's home instead of his big fancy one. Todd triple-checks the stage clothes now before Dallas gets dressed."

"She won't take it." Dallas spoke for the first time, bitterness and regret mixing inside him. "Look at her. Listen to what she said. She's mentally out the door already."

He saw Charley's body tense and the spark of fire catch flame in her eyes. How well he remembered that fire, only it had been for a different reason. A tightening low in his

groin brought home the fact that even twenty years couldn't erase the lust she had always aroused in him. And more. A lot more.

Damn!

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she shot back. "So you could point out I let my feelings interfere with business. Well guess what, Mr. Hot-Shot Star. I'm a professional and I never let personal feelings interfere with business. Besides, anything between us is in the past. You're as much a stranger to me as all those people whistling and cheering for you tonight."

"Tonight was all about how I make a living," he told her in a deceptively soft voice. "Lots of nickels and dimes out there." In all this time he still hadn't forgotten the words she'd hurled at him with such disdain. Acrimony died a slow death.

Obviously irritated at both of them, Morgan cut off the back-and-forth exchange. "So you'll take it, Charley? You'll set up the protection he needs and try to find out who's behind this?"

Dallas braced himself for her answer, conflict roiling inside him. He hoped she took the job and prayed she didn't. His life was complicated enough as it was.

"I'll think about it."

"But —"

"Morgan. I said I'd think about it. Give me until the morning."

Dallas pushed himself out of his chair. "Don't do me any favors, Charley. I've gotten along fine without you all these years. I can handle things now."

He strode to the door, ready to toss her out. But just as he yanked it open, his left leg gave way on him and he stumbled. As he did, he heard a hiss in the air and a loud *thunk* in the back wall of the trailer.

Chapter Three

What happened next couldn't have taken more than a few seconds, although for Dallas it seemed as if everything occurred in slow motion. Charley leaped forward and slammed the door shut, pushing him out of the way while yanking a small gun from an ankle holster. Morgan took a step toward him, a stunned expression on his face.

"Everyone down," Charley snapped. "Now."

Dallas managed to get himself back into his chair. "Someone's got a lot of balls to take a shot like that with people still around," he growled.

"Quiet," Charley hissed at him. "Morgan, kill the lights."

She was all business now, cool and steady. This was a Charley whom Dallas had never seen.

Morgan's hand swept over the light switches, plunging them into near darkness. "Now what?"

"Now nobody move, okay?"

Charley eased the door open a crack, waited to see what happened next, cocked her head, listening. But all they could hear was the noise of the stragglers still making their way out of the parking lot and the roadies tearing down the equipment.

"No one seems to be paying attention," Morgan said softly from the darkness. "I'd have thought a shot like that would draw a crowd. At least Sawyer, protecting his assets."

"Silencer," Charley told him. "That's what that funny sound was. I'm hoping whoever did this got his shot off and scrambled."

"I still say it takes a lot of big ones to do this," Dallas repeated.

Charley rose from her crouch. "Stay here. Keep the lights off. I'll be right back. Is there another door out of this thing?"

"In the bedroom," Morgan said.

Keeping low to the floor, Charley made her way toward the other exit. Dallas ground his teeth in the dark, waiting for her to return, wishing he knew what the hell was happening out there. Minutes ticked by before the front door opened and Charley moved soundlessly inside. She shut the door again and turned the lights back on.

"I can't see anyone or anything out there," she announced. "Too much commotion and the only lights are in the parking lots. I'm sure whoever this is planned it very carefully. Picked the spot. Made sure he was hidden. And just waited for the trailer door to open. Morgan, where's the damn facility security you told me about?"

He spread his hands out. "I figured once the show was over and Dallas was inside he was okay. Besides, I knew you'd be coming down here."

"Me?" Dallas could hear the anger in her voice. "I came here for a meeting. I wasn't even sure I was going to take the job."

She stalked over to the wall and eyed the damage. "Well, that's a damn bullet, that's for sure. Morgan, you'd better call the police. Get someone down here."

"No." Dallas was shaking all over, a combination of rage, fear and adrenaline. But despite the gravity of the situation, he didn't want cops crawling all over the place, drawing the media like flies to honey. "No cops."

"Dallas," she argued, "someone shot at you. That's a reportable crime."

"So far they haven't done me a damn bit of good and they'll just bring reporters like green on grass." He clenched and unclenched his fists. "I want you to handle this, Charley." And then he said the one word he knew would get her. "Please."

"Damn." She shook her head.

He could see the conflicting emotions chase across her face. The tightening of her body as she worked to bring herself under control. But he also knew she wouldn't waste time arguing. If nothing else, that shot had drawn her in. She pulled a BlackBerry Slim Line from her jeans pocket and hit a speed dial number.

"Mike? Did I wake you? Okay, good. Get Sam, tell him to bring his kit and both of you meet me. Right now."

She gave directions before disconnecting the call then looked from Dallas to Morgan and back again. "You're right. You can bet the shooter's long gone by now. Nothing for the cops to do but take a report again. My people will scan the area and do what we can. At least get the bullet out and see what it tells us."

"Didn't the shooter take a big chance with a crowd around here?" Morgan wanted to know.

"Maybe. Or maybe he had a place all staked out and just had to wait for the right moment. My guys will check out what we can and go from there."

"So you're taking the job?"

She lifted an eyebrow. "Do I have a choice now? If I walk away and something happens to Dallas it would be a slap to my professional integrity. But we'll have some major ground rules to follow. And I don't come cheap."

"Money's not a problem," Morgan assured her. "I know what you charge. And like I said, you're the best and that's what we need." He waved at the bullet hole. "Obviously."

"All right. As soon as I finish up here I'll go back to the office and get a contract drawn up, and a security schedule. Where do you go next?"

"Fort Worth. The concert's day after tomorrow. We're supposed to fly up in the morning. Can you get up and running by then?"

"I'm already up and running." She stood and pulled out her BlackBerry again, made another call and spoke softly into the phone. Then she turned back to the two of them. "I assume you were planning to go back to the ranch tonight. How are you getting there?"

"A limo as usual. Same thing we always do after a show. Gives Dallas a chance to come down and unwind."

Charley shook her head. Dallas could see she was all business now.

"Don't do it. Cancel the limo. I'll have someone drive you to a hotel. A *low-profile* hotel. Pick one now, before my guy gets here." She punched a speed dial on her phone again. "Mike? Yeah. Wake up Gary and tell him to show up with one of the SUVs. I have a passenger run for him." When she hung up she looked back at Morgan. "We need a hotel where people would be least likely to look for the two of you."

"Any suggestions?"

"I do. I'll discuss it with Gary when he picks you up. When you register use your name instead of Dallas'." She reached into her jeans pocket, pulled out a slim business card holder, extracted a card and handed it to Morgan. "My cell number's on the back. Call me as soon as you're settled in and we'll set up an early morning meet."

"Where will you be?"

"Here while we check the situation out. Then back at my office." Her lips turned up in a wry grin. "Not much sleep for me tonight. And by the way, when I say don't tell anyone where you'll be, that includes his manager, the road manager and all the roadies as well as the band."

"Jesus, Charley." Dallas shot up from his chair. "We have a show in two nights. Usually I meet with Todd and Sawyer before I leave, we go over the concert notes from tonight."

"I'll have Sawyer call Morgan on his cell."

They heard the snick of the lock as the door handle turned and Charley immediately had her gun in her hand.

Sawyer stepped into the trailer and looked at each of them, frowning. "What's going on? Something new happen?"

Charley gave him a concise report of the shooting, shoving her gun in her waistband at the small of her back.

"All right," he said. "This is enough. We take steps now."

"No police," Dallas said. "Whoever did this is long gone and we don't need a fucking three-ring circus out here."

"Your safety is my first concern," the manager said. He looked at Charley. "I hope this means you've agreed to sign on."

Dallas watched the play of emotions on Charley's face. For a brief moment she looked like a deer trapped in the headlights, but that was gone as quickly as it came, replaced by grim determination.

She nodded. "I'm stashing Dallas with Morgan for the night in a hotel yet to be named. I hope you don't take offense if I don't tell even you where they are."

He smiled. "Would it do me any good to object?" When she shook her head he said, "I thought not. Okay, tell me what you need me to do."

"Relay any concert notes to Morgan. I want Dallas to keep his cell turned off. Eliminates the chance of someone calling him and triangulating his location."

"Jesus, Charley." Dallas blew out a breath. "You actually think whoever this is would go to all that trouble? Even to digging up my private cell number?"

"I think we can't take a chance. We'll go to Fort Worth tomorrow, a day early, and you can rehearse there. I'll make arrangements for a place."

"Todd and the band will piss and moan," Dallas objected.

"Better for them to be pissed off," Sawyer commented, "than for you to be dead."

Dead. That certainly puts a damper on a conversation.

"You can't think any of the guys are involved, Charley," he protested. "Jesus. These people are like family."

"Not quite." Morgan's voice was controlled but harsh. "I'm your family. Those guys are distant relatives. Remember, every one of them has a financial reason for being part of this team." He looked at Sawyer. "You most of all."

Sawyer held up his hands. "Hey. I want whatever will keep my man here safe. They're all big guys. They can take a little shuffling around."

"I'll stick to him like glue, Charley," Morgan promised. "When you get everything in place, how do you want me to explain all this to the others?"

"Tell them you're taking these threats seriously," Charley said. She looked at Sawyer, who nodded. "That you've arranged for a professional agency to provide security and look into what's happening. If these guys are all your 'family', as you say, they'll go along with this."

"I'll go brief them right now."

When the door closed behind him Dallas looked at Charley and Morgan and ground his teeth in an effort to keep from saying anything else. He was itching for a fight but the last two people he should pick one with were Morgan and Charley. Especially Charley. He didn't want her to get the idea she made him antsy or uneasy. Or had any effect on him at all.

Yeah, right. Who am I kidding?

"So exactly how will all this work from now on?" he asked, aware of how edgy his voice sounded. Well, damn it, he *was* edgy.

"When we meet tomorrow I'll have all the details worked out for you." She shifted her gaze to Morgan. "And I'll need a retainer as quickly as you can get a check cut. Do you have to go to Sawyer for that? Should I have asked him before he left?"

Morgan looked at Dallas and back at Charley.

"What? I told you I'm expensive. Don't tell me he'll bitch about the cost."

"It's not that," Morgan said. "Money's definitely not the problem. But I'm going to pay for this out of a private account I set up for Dallas. I oversee the finances now."

Charley looked at Morgan then back at Dallas. "Since when do you handle your brother's finances? In my experience that's always the manager's job."

"Go ahead," Dallas said with resignation. "Tell her what you're doing. I appreciate it even though I think it's not necessary."

"Call me a mother hen but I won't see you in the same situation you were in before." He turned to Charley. "After the accident my brother was in a mess. Broke. After all the medical bills were paid there was damn little left. A lot of it pissed away on his self-indulgent habits."

Charley's jaw dropped. "Are you kidding me? Dallas had made a lot of money. A lot of money."

Dallas gritted his teeth, humiliated that Charley was getting a glimpse into his stupidity. He could just imagine what she was thinking.

"He was never very good with finances," Morgan went on, "and he and I weren't exactly on speaking terms at the time."

"What about the rights to his songs? Most performers like him have their own publishing company."

Dallas wished the floor would open up and swallow him. This was all stuff Morgan had asked him about. Things he'd paid no attention to as long as the songs kept climbing the charts, the women and booze and drugs were there for the taking, and his fans idolized him. He was suddenly overcome with an urge to chuck it all, grab Charley and try to pretend the last twenty years hadn't happened.

Morgan shrugged, the lines in his face deepening. "I didn't know enough about the industry at the time to ask the right questions and Dallas sure wasn't in any shape to do it. Sawyer explained very carefully that there were huge debts to pay. Dallas had bought a huge amount of real estate, fancy homes, other shit. But everything was mortgaged to the hilt and Sawyer sold it all to pay bills and pay off the contracts on the musicians."

"Couldn't the band and road crew just get other jobs?"

"I told you." Morgan's face was set in lines of frustration. "I had no idea how the hell anything worked so I didn't argue at the time. But I'm determined it won't happen again."

"Did you ask for an accounting?" Charley wanted to know.

"Yeah, but I really didn't learn anything." He grimaced. "But I haven't let go of it yet. I've been learning everything I can about this business. When this tour is over I'm going to ask to see all those records again and give them to the accountant I hired."

"And what does Sawyer say about that?"

"He and I bumped heads over this but now our accountant keeps all the books—concerts, CD sales, merchandise, the whole works. Sawyer gets his cut and that's it. And every month I invest a certain percentage for Dallas."

Charley gave an unladylike snort. "I take it the manager isn't one of your favorite people."

Morgan shrugged. "He's a hell of a promoter and he's done right by Dallas on this tour, but at this particular moment I don't trust anyone but my brother and me. And you."

"That can't make you very popular with the people around him," Charley commented.

"I'm not running a popularity contest. Just looking out for my brother's interests. Part of our deal. Right, Dallas? You're still good with this?"

Dallas nodded, embarrassed to have the flaws in his life exposed to Charley. He turned away and pulled another cold drink from the cooler. As he chugged half the drink from the can, he was struck by the knowledge that before long everything in his life would be laid bare for Charley Roper to see. Defects and all. Not even his image would be left in her eyes. He wouldn't even have his pride.

Why the hell had he agreed to let Morgan bring Charley back into his life, anyway? His pride was yelling stupid, stupid, stupid. He should have told Morgan to figure out something else. But the plain truth was, he was more grateful than he would ever be able to express to his brother for pulling him out of the hole he'd been in and making them a family again. It was worth a little humiliation. And even Sawyer knew her by reputation.

"Okay." Charley shoved her cell in her pocket. "I'm going outside to wait for my people. I'll bring Gary to you as soon as he gets here. Morgan, as soon as I hear from you about where you're stashed we'll set up a time to meet in the morning and be set to go."

"Thank you."

With her hand on the door knob, she looked at Dallas. "Nice to see you again."

"Yeah, sure. I bet."

Then she was gone, but her scent lingered in the room, the same fresh scent of flowers that he'd always loved. He had to get past this or he'd go nuts.

"This is a damn stupid idea," he told his brother. "I was a fool to agree to it. Not the security. After what just happened even I'm not stupid enough to ignore the risk. But bringing Charley in? That woman still hates my guts. And I don't feel too friendly toward her either, so I'm not sure how well this is going to work."

"Hopefully it won't be for long. She'll find out who this is while protecting you and you can each go your separate ways again." He shook his head. "Too bad. She's turned into a damn fine woman. And successful too."

And didn't Dallas just know that. Another bitter pill for him to swallow.

Chapter Four

Okay, so I wasn't over him.

Not even a little bit.

Damn.

Waiting for my team to show up, I'd paced the areas around the trailer, looking for the most likely location for the shooter, doing my best to block Dallas-the-man out of my mind and focus only on Dallas-the-client. Not an easy task.

There were several copses of trees behind the amphitheater that offered excellent coverage and an easy escape. By the time the two men I'd been waiting for arrived, I could narrow down the places for them to search, although I didn't think they'd find much except the actual angle of trajectory of the bullet. Fat lot of good that would do. Whoever this was, he was very clever at covering his tracks. And there was nothing worse than a savvy killer. I left them to what they did best, giving them a key to the trailer I'd weaseled out of Morgan. When Gary, one of my top specialists, arrived finally a half hour later, I handed Dallas into his care and headed away from the facility. Gary would make sure the Creed brothers were tucked away safely for the night.

During the entire drive from the amphitheater to my office I was shaking, not from fear but from anger at myself for letting the man get to me this way and from the mixture of emotions I didn't want to feel. I'd have been better off not seeing him at all. In just one night, Dallas was back in my head again, his let-me-fuck-you voice shattering my defenses.

Emotion churned up inside me as the walls around my heart and my memories cracked. Remembering the way his hands had made me feel every time we'd made love was calling up sensations I didn't want to deal with. The flutter in my cunt had increased to an insistent throb and my breasts ached unbearably in their lace and satin restraint. The same reaction I'd always had whenever I was within fifty feet of Dallas Creed.

My stomach roiled, my pulse raced and the iron self-control I'd worked so hard to develop was slowly shattering. How in all holy hell was I going to handle this as a professional?

It was one thing to read about Dallas Creed in the newspaper or online, or see clips on television. Being so close to him in the flesh was more disturbing than I wanted to admit to myself. Just looking at him after all this time made my body heat and my pulse race. His face had deeper lines that gave it a stronger look, more character, but his eyes were still the same smoldering gray they'd always been. Up close I saw his tan was even deeper than it appeared onstage.

But the tan couldn't hide the network of scars on his left leg. I'd glanced at them once then deliberately moved my eyes away. He must have been a mess and I hadn't even picked up the phone to ask how he was. Now all the feelings of the past were back and I wanted to throw myself at him and make all that pain disappear.

I kept trying to focus on the problem at hand but I could only think of one thing—for the next however many days, Dallas Creed and I would be joined at the hip.

I was so screwed.

I banged my hand on the steering wheel. Damn it. I was a professional and I had no intention of letting him see how he rattled me. If he didn't already know. His eyes, wise from experience in misery, had raked over me like an x-ray machine, uncovering all the layers. And my curiosity about the man and the twenty years since we'd last been together was almost as strong as my fear of working so close to him.

If my brain was functioning properly I'd have refused the job, but I was afraid that would only prove to Dallas that he still had a hold on me. Why on earth had I been so sure I was over him? Cured. Completely immune to him. It was way too obvious to me that this was not the case. Delusional was more like it, protecting myself from the remembered hurtful realization that the man could put his music ahead of me. Of us.

I'd managed to survive all this time by not acknowledging my part in the breakup. By refusing to accept that I could have been less rigid, less obsessed about my own future the way I'd accused Dallas of acting about his. All these years I'd been telling myself I was the one in the right. I was the sensible one. Oh, how easily we all delude ourselves. It was still there, that irresistible pull, that palpable electricity.

Damn!

I parked my car and let myself into the building. I wanted a drink, badly, but knew with the hours of work ahead of me, I'd have to settle for coffee. No time for a drunken pity party.

Riding up in the elevator, I thought about how young and idealistic we'd been back in that long-ago time. No, unrealistic was probably more like it. And looking back, hadn't I been just as stubborn as Dallas? Just as selfish about what I wanted? Wasn't I the one who'd refused to take his calls or let him come to talk with me?

Stubborn selfishness didn't offer a lot of personal satisfaction though. When Dallas and I broke up, the FBI had turned out to be a lifesaver, a place to focus my energy. All the plaudits from my supervisors looked good on my record. They were a big plus when, after five years, I realized the FBI and I weren't the best fit and Hillcroft came calling. I carved a good place for myself there too, but they didn't know there was nothing else in my life. No man. None. Once burned, forever shy. Law enforcement had become not just my dream but my existence. After Dallas, I'd never let anyone else in.

Now here he was again, the one person who could crack that shell and drag my feelings out into the open. Make me feel alive. Break my heart and maybe my soul. I had the rep of not being afraid of anything. Fearless Charley, they called me. But I was afraid of Dallas Creed and his effect on my emotions.

Wait. This was a job. Period. What could he possibly do to me?

Break my heart.

Again.

In the next second I shouted in my head, *No! I will not let that happen.*

In the office I busied myself with the familiar routine of calling people at odd hours to bring them in for a new assignment and creating the matrix that everyone would use for shift assignments. As soon as the team arrived I plunged into the briefing, handing out assignments and giving April Lorenz, my hot-shot computer tech, a list of things to dig for, yesterday if possible.

But all the minutiae in the world couldn't prevent unwanted thoughts from chasing through my brain.

I was still working at my desk when Morgan called almost an hour after midnight to give me the name of an older hotel at the edge of downtown San Antonio where they'd checked in. I was familiar with it and agreed it was definitely a place where no one would think to look for either of them.

"We'll meet at eight," I told Morgan, aware that morning would come all too soon. "In the coffee shop."

Finally I crashed on my office couch and managed a few hours' sleep.

* * * * *

When Morgan slid into the booth opposite me, the strain of what was happening was evident on his face and his smile was a little forced. He looked as if he'd had no more sleep than I had. He sipped his coffee, a brooding look on his face.

"Is Dallas giving you a hard time about this?" I asked. We didn't have room for a prima donna attitude in this mess. "Because we haven't signed anything yet. If he doesn't want to hire me I can always find you someone else..."

"No." He set his mug down so hard coffee sloshed over the top. "Dallas doesn't know what the hell he wants. Except to stay clean, thank god. But Sawyer Black is raising eighteen kinds of hell and demanding I go home and leave Dallas to him."

"Bad mistake," I pointed out. "You're the only one in this whole package who wants nothing out of this except to protect your brother."

"Don't I just know that."

I couldn't stop myself from asking the question that had been brewing in my mind forever. "What happened, Morgan? How did he get so twisted up?"

Morgan sighed. "Jesus, Charley. I don't even know where to start. He got on a train and it started rolling so fast he couldn't get off. We weren't exactly close all that time, you know."

Oh yes, I knew as well as he did. When Dallas had walked away from me he'd also walked away from the ranch, his future and his family as well. I knew he'd had

problems dealing with his mother's death from cancer. Then his father died of a heart attack and everything fell to Morgan, the older brother. I wondered now as I had then just how much he'd resented what I'd called Dallas' defection.

Even as much as I'd tried to avoid it, like everyone else out there I knew Dallas Creed's rise to fame had been nothing less than meteoric. His record sales exceeded everyone's expectations. His concerts sold out in hours. His merchandise sales were off the charts. There was hardly a person who didn't know the rags-to-riches story that publicists played for all it was worth. The sexy-as-sin performer whose voice was as golden as his hair. The band that finally had its shit together. Sawyer Black, a sharp-eyed hanger-on at the fringes of the music industry, who fell into a bar one night and heard Dallas and his songs. The rest, as they say, is history. With Dallas in the middle of it all, lapping it all up, riding the gravy train to glory.

I stirred sweetener into my coffee. "He was hurt pretty bad in the accident, wasn't he?"

"Yes." The lines on his face deepened. "At first the doctors weren't even sure he'd pull through. It took seven surgeries to put his leg back together."

I saw Morgan's entire face tighten as the memories came back to him.

"But he did," I said in a soft voice. "And you took him in."

"Hell, Charley. He didn't have any place else to go and that arrogant bastard of a manager said whatever money was there went to pay off debts."

"Tell me again what happened when you asked for an accounting?" Why was I pushing this? I tried to tell myself I didn't really care and it wasn't any of my business anyway. It had nothing to do with what was happening now.

"Sawyer handed me a folder full of outstanding bills and a statement showing where the money had gone and what was still available. I told him to go ahead and pay everything off." He raked his fingers through his hair. "I run a ranch, not a music business thing. What the hell did I know about it? Sawyer had taken care of him for seventeen years. And based on what I'd learned of my brother's life since he hit the big time, it didn't seem all that out of line."

"So you brought him home. Then what?" What was I looking for here? It was old history.

"I told him I'd make sure he got back in whatever shape he could, except no booze, no drugs and no women. Period. Just him and me."

I stared into my coffee cup. "And he did it. Just like that."

"No." His fist curled around his mug. "Not just like that. We had a full year of pure hell before we came out the other end okay. But one thing we did get out of it—we learned to like each other again and trust each other."

"What made him go back on tour?"

I couldn't imagine the craving for that particular high was still so strong in Dallas. Especially after nearly losing his life and wrecking his body.

"When he began to get his shit together he started writing songs again. I'm no expert but to me they sounded even better than what he'd written before. We talked about it and decided he should call Sawyer to come out and meet with him. Originally the idea was to just record a CD but Black was so excited about the material he talked him into the whole nine yards." Morgan snorted. "I could almost see the dollar signs rolling around in that asshole's eyes."

"Okay. I get that you don't like the guy but he has done a great job where your brother's concerned."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Morgan sipped his coffee.

"What about women? Surely there must have been some coming around."

Oh god, how I hated myself for asking. The words jumped out of my mouth before I could swallow them. Of course, I could always use the excuse that I needed to investigate people even on the periphery of Dallas' life.

Morgan managed a semblance of a grin. "Are you asking for yourself, Charley, or is this just business?"

"Just business," I assured him in a firm voice. "Trying to get a handle on the people he's involved with now, or has been, and see who might want to do this to him."

The coffee sloshed around in my stomach, mixing with the mud I'd finished from the bottom of the office coffeemaker and threatening to claw its way up my throat. How the hell was I going to handle this job? Seeing Dallas every day? Being close to him? Instead of working, I should check myself into a very good psychiatric clinic. Then again, I'd always been one for confronting pain head-on and burning it.

I just hoped this time it didn't burn me.

"Charley?" I was suddenly conscious of a hand waving in front of my face. "You in there or has your brain taken a vacation?"

I blinked, aware that I'd drifted off into a memory and embarrassed both that it had happened and that Morgan had witnessed it. Lifting my mug to my lips, I tried not to grimace at the bitter taste of the now cold brew. I kept my eyes lowered, unwilling to see what I was sure was a knowing look on Morgan's face.

"Sorry. Just thinking of how we're going to handle all this without making too many waves."

One second of silence. Two seconds.

"Okay. If you say so. How *are* we going to do this?"

I thanked god I had something to distract me from the unwelcome thoughts crowding my brain. I opened my briefcase and took out a folder. Flipping it open, I spread the papers out for Morgan to see.

"This is the contract. It's our standard form but you should read it carefully before you sign anything." I slid one sheet of paper out and put it to the side. "And this is the schedule of how the team will work. We'll go over it when we get the contract out of the way."

I signaled the waitress for fresh coffee and sat back, nursing it while Morgan read each page carefully. I was still tense from last night's encounter with Dallas and again questioning the wisdom of accepting this job. My self-control only went so far. But I was a professional, I kept reminding myself. And I was perversely anxious to show that off to Dallas Creed.

When Morgan reached the last page of the contract he looked up and nodded. "Got a pen? This all looks fine to me."

I handed him one from my briefcase, watching as he scrawled his signature and the date on both copies. Then he opened the envelope he'd had sitting on the table, slipped a check out of it and filled in the amount of the retainer.

"Where do we go from here?" he wanted to know.

"I've changed your travel arrangements to Fort Worth, for starters."

Morgan lifted an eyebrow. "And you did this because?"

"Because we don't want to be predictable in the wake of last night's incident," I explained. "You said you have a charter plane everyone takes, except the road crew with the equipment. Let the band go ahead with that. I've got a different one for you, Dallas and me."

He frowned. "You think that's necessary?"

"Everything's necessary. You just get yourself and Dallas ready. I'll take it from there."

"What about transportation on the ground? He usually travels to and from wherever he's going—the airport, rehearsal, the performance—in the limo."

"How nice for him. But we're not going to do that and paint a big target on his back. I've made other arrangements. He'll have to live with it. If he truly wants to live." I pushed the schedule sheet toward him. "Next order of business. This is how I have the security details set up, who'll check out each venue, how they'll split up during each performance. My office is busy getting diagrams for all the venues on the tour so we can plan more specifically."

"About Dallas' personal protection..." he began.

"I can vouch for every person on this crew," I assured him. "Otherwise they wouldn't be here. They are used to all the very high-profile clients we handle and the people I assign as his personal guard will protect him to the fullest."

Morgan shook his head. "All well and good, but I want you to handle that yourself. The personal guard stuff."

Me. Right. I should have seen it coming. On the other hand, maybe I had and just chose to ignore it. Coffee splashed over the rim of my mug and I set it down before Morgan could see the slight tremor in my hands. My stomach knotted and a dull ache began behind my eyes.

"I'll be heading the team personally, Morgan," I pointed out carefully. "No problem. I'll have an eye on everything. But I think having someone else with Dallas is the best way to play this."

"No."

He didn't shout, but the quiet way he said the word had an even greater impact on me. It was obvious he'd made up his mind before I showed up today and had no intention of budging.

"I have to split the time with someone," I pointed out. "Even I need to sleep." Morgan opened his mouth to say something but I shook my head. "No, whatever it is. I'll have someone else babysit him at night, but it will be someone I'd trust with my own life. And that's as good as it will get. What does Dallas have to say about that, anyway?" I almost dreaded the answer.

"He doesn't know yet. It's my idea. I don't trust him to anyone but you."

Now I felt even sicker. Springing this on Dallas, all things considered, wasn't going to be a picnic under any circumstances. So here were the questions popping up. Did I want him protected? Did I want to find out who was after him? Yes, regardless of what had happened between us. But skewing my perspective was the ill-timed realization that the feelings for Dallas Creed I'd been sure were buried deeply had only been hovering beneath the surface, waiting for the chance to break through.

Shit, shit, shit. I need to immerse my body in a tub of ice cubes for three days before I start on this assignment. If only.

Sighing, I pulled both copies of the contract over in front of me, signed them, handed one back to Morgan and put everything else in my briefcase. Without looking across the table I asked, "What do you expect him to say when you tell him about this?"

"Tell me about what?"

I'd been so busy averting my eyes from Morgan's gaze I hadn't seen Dallas come into the coffee shop and approach the booth. But that familiar whiskey-roughened voice both startled me and sent unwanted shivers down my spine.

His hair was still wet from his shower and the black t-shirt with *Dallas Creed, Take Me Home* on it and the worn, faded jeans clung to his body like a second skin, something I tried hard not to notice. Instead I focused on the new lines etched into his tanned face and the silver threads mixed with the blond on his head. And the sadness so evident in his eyes, a look that set my emotions tumbling again.

Shit, shit, shit.

I couldn't fool myself. Every bit of feeling I'd ever had for Dallas Creed erupted to the surface, making me shake inside and all my pulses beat like jungle drums. Worse yet, here came the hard nipples and damp panties again. At this rate I'd need to start carrying fresh panties in my briefcase.

Shit! Just what I needed.

"Morning, Dallas."

With a supreme effort I made my voice as nonchalant as possible, despite the fact my pulse was racing and my heart thudding. Caffeine, I told myself, and almost believed it. I'd had enough coffee during the night to jolt a dead body. But when Dallas slid into the booth next to me it took every bit of control not to let my feelings swamp me. What was it about this man that he'd taken root inside me and never left? Of course I knew the answer to that question. I just preferred to try to ignore it.

Yeah. Fat chance.

I scooted over on the bench seat as far as I could. When I finally made myself look at him, he was watching me with a strange expression in his eyes. Then he blinked and it was gone.

"Somebody planning to fill me in on this?" he prodded. "After all, it is my ass on the line. I should at least know what's happening."

I was glad Morgan answered him because I was still gathering my scattered wits. I was already sure I'd made a colossal mistake, but the contracts were signed now so I was stuck. I never went back on my word.

"We've just been finalizing the terms of the contract with Roper Protective Services," Morgan told him. "I also have a schedule of security officers, where they'll be and who'll be doing what. I need to get Charley layouts of the next four places we'll be playing."

Dallas nodded at the waitress when she appeared with a carafe and another coffee mug. He waited until the mug was full and he'd taken a sip before he said anything else.

"We already talked about that last night. So what is it that no one's telling me?"

Morgan looked at me. I shrugged, telling him, *it's your ball game.*

"I told Charley I thought she should be the one to handle your personal security." The look on Morgan's face said plainly, *Don't fuck with me on this. You owe me.* "I'd feel a lot better about it than having some stranger glued to your side."

A heavy silence descended in the booth. Morgan kept his eyes on Dallas, I kept mine on my coffee mug and Dallas...Well, for a long moment he didn't move or say a word.

"So, Charley." I felt the tension radiating from his body. "How do you feel about that setup?"

I cleared my throat and forced myself to look at him. "I told Morgan I thought, considering everything, it would be a bad idea. I'm sure you'd rather have someone else."

He took a swallow of his coffee. "And you? Would you rather assign someone else to me personally?"

I wished I had something besides the stupid coffee mug to fidget with, but that would only give away my nervousness. Something I seldom had to deal with. "I think it

would be best for all of us if we stuck with the two men I've assigned to you. They'll rotate so everybody gets some sleep."

More silence.

Dallas looked at Morgan. "I think you're right about this, bro. Charley has a vested interest in keeping my ass alive. To the others I'm just a piece of meat to keep safe."

I couldn't believe he was saying that. I would have bet anything he'd be the first to argue the point. Was this, in some twisted way, a belated effort to get back at me?

Wait a minute. I wasn't the wronged party here. Both of us had been selfish and pigheaded.

And I wanted to point out to him that splitting up had obviously been the right decision for both of us. Look at what we'd achieved.

Professional, I reminded myself. Be professional.

"I appreciate the confidence you both seem to have in me, but we all know Dallas and I spending that much time together would be a mistake. Besides, I have to coordinate both the team and the investigation going on at my office."

"Are you implying you still have feelings for me after all this time?" Dallas' voice gave no indication of his own real feelings. "That they'd get in the way of business?"

"Hell no," I told him. "I just believe —"

"Then it's all set." He finished his coffee and set the mug down. "We need to get out of this place. Morgan and I discussed heading straight to Fort Worth, checking into the hotel and getting settled. We need to find a place to rehearse and keep the press off our backs."

"We can do that," I told him. "Will a sound studio work for your rehearsal?"

He nodded. "It's what we usually use. Sawyer canceled the rehearsal here as you requested but with things the way they are, I'd feel a whole hell of a lot better if we had one run-through together before the next show. Are you saying you can handle that?"

I nodded, picked up my BlackBerry and texted my office. Jacquie would know who to contact and how, and coordinate with my team leader. "All right. Done. We'll have the information when we arrive in Fort Worth. What else?"

"Todd will have to get the instruments off the truck. We won't need amps. He knows what to do."

I texted that to my agent supervising the band then made notes in my smartphone.

"Sawyer will handle the merchandise like he always does," Dallas went on.

"Merchandise?" I raised an eyebrow.

"You know. The shit they always sell at concerts. That's his department."

"I'll be keeping an eye on that," Morgan told him, his voice tight.

"Let him check the stuff over with the local distributor and make sure the inventory's good to go," Dallas said. "You don't need to waste your time doing that crap. Just get a sales count at the end of the night like you always do."

"Last thing," Morgan said, looking at me. "There might be someone from the record label there. They'll want access to Dallas."

I nodded. "I'm used to that. We'll handle it. Oh, and we'll need permanent ID tags for everyone on the Roper team. Just like the crew wears."

Morgan nodded. "Just give me a count."

"All right then." Dallas leaned back in the booth and turned his head toward me, his gaze piercing. "I guess your next order of business is to tell us how you plan to get us there safely."

Accepting what I couldn't change and slapping on my best professional face, I zipped up my briefcase and picked up my BlackBerry again. At least having something to do would give me a chance to get my hormones under control.

"Both of you go upstairs and pack. Tell me your room numbers and I'll be up there in a few minutes with the details. Oh, and one more thing. No more limos to and from the concerts. They call too much attention to you. From now on someone from Roper Security will be driving you in an SUV wherever you have to go."

Dallas' eyes locked with mine. "I don't need the limos, Charley. Sawyer might bitch about it. He likes the trappings of celebrity for me. But for me? Any wheels will do."

As soon as they were gone I called the office again. If Jacquie, my wonderful secretary who kept everything straight for me and organized everyone else, was surprised at the changes, she was smart enough not to comment. I seldom did the client's personal detail myself and I was sure she was dying to ask me why this time, but she just took down the info and promised to get new schedules made out.

"What about the list I left?" I asked.

"Taken care of as usual." She laughed softly. "Relax, Charley. All the arrangements are made. You just deal with whatever demon's sitting on your shoulder."

"Excuse me?" The damn woman was far too perceptive.

"Call me when you've got the package with you."

The package. That was how we always referred to the client.

Disconnecting the call, I pulled myself together, left money on the table for the coffee and reluctantly took the elevator to the fourth floor.

I knocked on Morgan's door and called out my name, but it was Dallas who opened it. He made an exaggerated bow and sweep of his hand, ushering me in. When he straightened up I searched his face for any sign of anger, bitterness or resentment, but it was carefully blank.

"All right. Let's sit down and go over what the plans are."

I carefully walked them through everything I'd arranged, including how they would get to the airport for the private charter Jacquie had arranged and what would happen when they landed at the Dallas/Fort Worth airport.

Dallas got up and fetched a bottle of water from the minifridge. "So tell me, Charley. What's the decision? Are you taking the daytime shift or the night one?"

I couldn't interpret his tone of voice. There was an edge to it, but I couldn't define what that edge was. I still didn't know if he was baiting me or giving in to Morgan and trying to be accommodating. Again I realized just how different this Dallas Creed was from the one I used to know.

"Daytime," I told him. Nights would be impossible. "Mike Donovan has the night shift. Morgan told me you always have a suite. We'll just make it a two-bedroom and Mike can bunk in the other one."

He uncapped the water bottle, chugged half of it then put the cap back on slowly and deliberately. His silvery eyes, now the color of slate, bored into me like twin lasers.

"Afraid to be alone with me at night, Charley?"

I didn't answer, waiting for him to play out his little game.

"Don't worry," he told me. "You'll be just another person trailing along behind me. Work everything out with Morgan. He'll tell me what I need to know." He turned his back and walked through the connecting door to his room.

And just like that I was dismissed.

I looked at Morgan and frowned. "I told you this was a mistake."

"You'll be fine, Charley. Dallas will be fine. We'll all be fine, especially if you find out who's doing this." He gave me a halfhearted smile. "He's just had a lot of issues to work through."

"Don't we all," I muttered. "All right. Let's go over the schedule for when we hit Fort Worth. Then I'm going home to pack some things. I'll be back in two hours with your ride to the plane. Don't let him leave here until then."

"I'll sit on him if I have to," he promised.

All the way back to my condo, and all the time I was packing, I couldn't get the image of Dallas out of my head. The almost-handsome face with too many lines in it. The hair, longer and threaded with silver. The leanness of his body and the way the jeans and t-shirt clung to it. But most of all, the pain in his eyes and the edge to his voice.

Why was he going along with this? Why had he agreed to let Morgan hire my firm? Better yet, why had he gone along with his brother's insistence that I assign myself to him personally? Was he planning some type of payback for our breakup? For my disdaining his choice of path to follow?

I shook my head, trying to clear all the questions and negative thoughts. I had a job to do. One I'd done so many times in so many places it really was routine. I could do it again and keep things completely impersonal.

Yeah, right.

Still, my traitorous mind couldn't let go of the images it kept dredging up from the past. Images from a scene long before that last terrible night when everything had just gone to hell.

* * * * *

Twenty years earlier

The shower in Dallas' small apartment wasn't much more than a closet with running water, but it made showering together an interesting activity.

"I love washing your body," Dallas murmured, working the shower gel into a rich lather in his hands.

"I get to wash yours too," I grinned, my pussy already quivering in anticipation of his touch...everywhere.

"Absolutely."

I loved listening to his voice...low, warm, slightly raspy like thick syrup running slowly downhill. I was so far gone with him that all he had to do was speak and immediately my pussy got wet and quivered for the feel of his cock inside me. Or his fingers. Or his tongue. Anything, as long as he was playing my body like a fine instrument the way he did so well.

"I think of you like my guitar," he once told me. "I love that first downstroke, running my fingers from your breasts to your cunt that tunes up your body. Jesus, Charley, I dream about it when I'm not with you, sometimes so hot I wake up harder than steel."

He turned me to face the wall of the shower and kneaded my muscles with his strong fingers. *Lower*, I wanted to scream. *Forget about my shoulders*. But Dallas always had a plan, taking his time, never rushing things, even when he himself was ready to go off like a rocket.

He massaged his way down my back in slow, deliberate strokes until he reached my ass, kneading the globes as he rubbed the lather into them, running a finger the length of the cleft so slowly a shiver raced over my spine. The tip of one finger teased at the tight, nerve-rich ring of my anus. I tried to back up closer to him but he held me in place.

His raspy chuckle was low in my ear, sensual in its roughness. "Something you want, darlin'? My cock in your ass?" He chuckled again. "I think I've created a monster here."

As wet as my body was, my mouth went dry. The first time I'd felt that thick cock in my ass I'd accepted it with a mixture of anticipation and fear. But Dallas had been patient, teaching me how to accept him and receive my own pleasure. That first anal orgasm had shocked me with its intensity. Now it seemed I couldn't get enough of that particular erotic sensation.

Dallas worked the lather into my ankles and up the column of my legs, kneaded the flesh gently, fingers just brushing the lips of my pussy. I tried to squeeze my thighs together but he used his hands to prevent me from doing so.

"Uh-uh, darlin'. I want that hot little cunt hungry and needy."

His teeth clamped lightly on the tender skin where neck and shoulder met and, without warning, one soap-slickened finger thrust inside me, curled to scrape against my G-spot. I shuddered as tiny spasms skittered through me.

"God, you are just so responsive. I could spend my life in bed with you just fucking our brains out."

A second finger joined the first, then a third, and my body automatically began to ride them, back and forth, seeking the rush of orgasm. I could feel the thick length of his cock bobbing against my ass as he rocked me, his other hand sliding around to cup one breast and pinch the nipple.

As I started to convulse he withdrew his hand, leaving me hungry and on edge. But in the next moment I felt the thick coolness of gel as he worked one finger into my ass, slicking the tissues and stretching the tight channel.

Yes, yes, yes!

I pressed both hands flat against the wall of the shower, thankful for the sluicing water that cooled my overheated body as Dallas worked me and stretched me and prepared me for his invasion.

When the broad head of his cock pressed against the tight opening, my cunt spasmed, anticipating the exquisite pleasure to come. I breathed slowly in and out as the thick erection moved farther and farther inside me, Dallas crooning encouragement in my ear. One more thrust and he was fully inside, long and hard and thick. Icy heat shot through me.

Dallas pressed one hand against my tummy to hold me tight against him while the other hands moved to stroke and caress and tease one breast.

"Hang on tight, darlin'. Here comes the ride."

And oh god, he was so right. He slammed into me again and again, driving me to that plane of pleasure where I lost all control and went spinning into space. Up, up, up, his hands tightening on me, his hips thrusting harder and harder.

And oh god, then we were there, his cock jerking inside me as I convulsed, everything disappearing except the thrust of his cock inside my ass and the pleasure spearing through me. Everything spasmed, shaking me until I was sure my body would shatter and fly into a million pieces.

Dallas dropped his head to my shoulder, his breath coming in uneven pants, his heart thudding heavily against my back. My legs had turned so rubbery, if he hadn't been holding me up I would have fallen to the floor of the shower.

Only the change in temperature of the water, from hot to warm to freezing, forced us to rouse ourselves from the erotic haze, quickly soap each other off and rinse under the frigid spray. But even cold water couldn't subdue the heat still consuming my body.

* * * * *

I blinked and the memory faded. Looking down at my hands, I saw that I was crushing a sweater into an unrecognizable blob and dropped it quickly on the bed. My palms were sweaty, my breasts throbbed and every part of my body cried out in frustration. Desperately I tried to call back the memory of that last dreadful night, the shouting and yelling, the cracking sound that had been my heart breaking. And the pain that lingered long afterward. Why couldn't I just focus on that instead of the memories that drove me to a state of arousal?

This was getting to be a problem. Scratch that. It *was* a problem. One I'd better deal with before Mike Donovan picked me up to collect the Creed brothers.

Chapter Five

Dallas couldn't seem to make himself sit still. At the same time, he didn't want his brother to see how rattled he was.

Charley Roper.

The past had certainly come back to bite him on the ass with a vengeance. He had to be out of his mind to agree to this arrangement. He'd needed a lot of booze and drugs to drive Charley out of his mind the last time, but the heady adrenaline rush of success had given the combination a boost.

He'd been sure his life was over when the truck rolled down the hill. Making matters worse was the fact that Randy Mueller, who played second rhythm guitar in the band, was in the truck with him. Dallas' leg had been all but destroyed but Randy's injury was even worse. His hand was damaged too badly to ever play again. Sawyer took care of Randy's medical bills and got him gigs working as a roadie with some local bands.

Dallas had wanted nothing more than to hide away from the world. But he'd begun writing again after a year and decided maybe he'd like to just record. No tours, just the albums.

Then Sawyer, excited about the new tunes, sweet-talked him into a concert or two. "Just to get people's juices flowing," he'd said. But the boost in sales it gave the new CD made Sawyer push for more. Two concerts suddenly became four and four became eight. Despite Morgan's arguments and disapproval, Dallas felt the old feelings rise up inside him. He let Sawyer talk him into another album and he found himself back in the rat race. Some of his old band members signed on again and helped him recruit others. He wrote, recorded, rehearsed, performed.

And one thing he'd insisted on—hiring Randy for the road crew.

"He's got a nasty attitude," Sawyer pointed out.

"Can you blame him? But hire him on. It's a deal-breaker."

So now Randy worked for Todd, the band was sounding good and they were playing to sold-out houses. There were two significant changes this time around, though. No drugs or booze of any kind. The band was only allowed beer except when they were on their own. And Morgan was with him, his source of support and strength. Keeping a firm eye on the books too, so he wouldn't be left high and dry again when they all came down to earth.

The last thing he'd expected was someone trying to kill him. For the life of him, he couldn't figure out who it was or why. He didn't think he'd made any new enemies and in three years surely old ones had let their grudges die out. It drove him nuts trying to

figure out the puzzle, and scared him too. He'd suddenly been faced with his own mortality and at forty-three, he took things more seriously.

If he had to hire someone, it made sense to hire Charley. Everyone in the business knew her agency was the best. But the thought of being with her every day until the tour was over made his body react in a way that gave him the jitters.

"Dallas?"

Morgan stood in the open doorway. Dallas mentally shook himself.

"What's up?"

"Our ride's here. Charley just called from the lobby. Grab your duffel bag. I checked with Todd and everything else is in the truck. We can grab it when the stuff arrives in Fort Worth."

"I can always buy something if I need it," Dallas said, stuffing things into the worn duffel bag. "What about the band?"

"Taking the original charter with two Roper guards. Charley doesn't think they're in danger. Whoever is doing this is focused on you," Morgan reminded him. "That's why you and the band are separated."

"But they've got protection too, right?"

Morgan nodded.

"Charley flying out with us?" Dallas asked.

"Of course she is, dipshit. She's your personal protection." He walked over until he was standing in front of Dallas. "I'm going to tell you one more time. Don't screw this up. Act your age and we'll get this taken care of."

Dallas jerked his bag up and slung the strap over his shoulder. "I'm fine. I'm with the program so just shut up and let's go."

Charley was waiting for them in the lobby, dressed in navy slacks that outlined her hips and the curve of her ass and a light blue blouse of some soft material that draped easily over her breasts beneath her open jacket. Her hair was done up in an intricate braid of some sort and gold hoops shone at her ears. Dallas felt all of his blood suddenly rush south, and shifted his duffel to cover his fly.

But Charley wasn't looking at any part of his anatomy. Her posture was stiff and her face wore a no-nonsense look. She glanced from one brother to the other then nodded.

"Let's go."

A black SUV stood idling at the curb. Morgan had already given him the no-limo speech and all things considered, he wasn't about to rock the boat. This time around he'd come to consider it pretentious, anyway, and used the car more to please Sawyer than anything else. The driver's door stood open and next to it, a tall, broad-shouldered man in dark slacks and a tan polo shirt bearing a Roper Protective Services logo stood waiting.

"Meet Mike Donovan," Charley said. "He'll be our driver wherever we go as well as my backup during the day and your nighttime personal detail."

She opened the tailgate so Dallas and Morgan could throw their bags in, her eyes roving the entire area all the time. When she bent to slam the gate shut, her jacket fell forward and Dallas saw the gun in its holster at her side. He was suddenly confronted with the truth of what Charley Roper had become—a tough-as-nails, very bright warrior who was going to protect his ass at all costs. She had done exactly what she'd told him she was going to do, and the realization shocked him.

This was not the soft, pliant yet go-to-hell twenty-something with whom he'd shared his dreams and enjoyed the best sex possible. And he'd damn well better get used to the new Charley or he'd find himself facing more trouble than he had already.

She indicated that Morgan should climb into the shotgun seat in front while he rode in back. Charley climbed in beside him then tapped Mike on the shoulder.

"Let's roll." She turned back to Dallas. "I have people at the airport keeping an eye on the plane. They've been there since one this morning. And a second car is following us from the hotel."

He figured she was talking to Morgan but her eyes were on him. He kept his face carefully blank. "Thank you," was all he said.

"I knew I made the right decision," Morgan said from the front. "Charley, you're exactly what we need. How are you coming checking people out?"

"My staff has been working on it since I went back to the office last night. They'll fax whatever they've got to the hotel by the time we get to Dallas, and keep working at it."

The balance of the ride to the airport was completed in silence, broken only by exchanges between Mike and Charley and reports from the chase car that came through on a walkie-talkie she held. Since she wasn't looking at him anymore, Dallas had the opportunity to study her more than he had the previous night. Today her hair was fixed in some kind of complicated braid, swept back from her face in a way that gave stark definition to her features. Her lashes were as dark and thick as he remembered, her skin as translucent and her lips still had that swollen, pouty look. But there were no smile lines at her mouth, just a tightness indicating strain, and a fine web of lines around her eyes. Her face was completely devoid of expression. He'd have to guess that while Charlotte Roper had made a huge success of herself and achieved her goals, she hadn't had much fun while doing it. And still didn't.

Well, truth be told, he hadn't had all that much fun either. God, he'd been so juiced about following his dream, making it with his music. And hell, he'd just been so stupid. But then Sawyer found him in that ratty highway bar and he'd been sure the gravy train was coming his way. In one way he'd been right. The sudden astounding success was heady, almost like a drug itself. The applause, the bigger and bigger audiences, the inevitable groupies, the waves of adulation. All of it jazzed him up. He added more people to the band, upgraded his stage wardrobe and had his hair cut by a "stylist". He

got the best table in restaurants when he chose to go out and landed on everyone's A-list.

But before long the high was more and more elusive. He'd needed the drugs and alcohol to take him there, to pump him up. Or maybe they were to blot out the fact that when he wasn't onstage or recording or writing new songs, there was an emptiness he hadn't expected and couldn't define. Some nights, when he fell asleep, Charley's face danced in his brain, her sweet body an image burned into his mind. After a while getting high didn't help. The same visions came to him even when he wasn't asleep. He'd been drunk as the devil the night he'd rolled the truck, but what he hadn't told anyone was he'd seen Charley's face in the windshield, disconnected and floating in the night air, looking flushed and satisfied the way she always did after they made love.

He'd been trying to get away from that image when he veered off the road and tumbled down the hill. Now here he was, in a situation where they'd be glued together every day. He couldn't decide if he wanted to rub his success in her face or yank her into his arms and tell her he'd never stopped loving her. Dallas couldn't help wondering if, way down deep, she still harbored any lingering feelings for him, or traces of regret for what they'd lost.

His mental wanderings had kept him so preoccupied he hadn't realized they'd reached the private airport where a charter jet awaited them. Now he listened to Charley review details with Morgan. He knew Roper Protective Services had made all the arrangements for the plane, vetted the crew and had placed a guard on the plane from the moment Jacquie had called the charter service. The doors to the SUV opened and Charley began talking softly into her walkie-talkie.

Mike Donovan motioned for Dallas to step out of the vehicle and follow him, while two other men unloaded the bags from the SUV and carried them to the plane. Dallas was aware of two more men who appeared from seemingly out of nowhere, in tan polo shirts and slacks like Donovan's. They fell into step, flanking him as they headed across the tarmac. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw Charley still speaking into the walkie-talkie as she supervised the final check of the plane, then talking to the pilots and the steward before they boarded. He climbed the foldout stairs, his security guards behind him, Morgan following them. Last of all came Charley.

Smooth. Like a well-oiled machine. It was impossible not to be impressed.

The interior of the cabin looked like someone's living room. Seating himself in one of the plush leather chairs, Dallas fastened his seat belt then waited to see where Charley would sit. Her eyes swept the area, checking where everyone was before taking the chair placed at an angle to his. He could almost reach out and touch her. Almost, but not quite. He had a feeling that's exactly the way Charley was going to be...close, but untouchable.

So what? That's what I want, isn't it?

"The steward will serve cold drinks and sandwiches as soon as we reach cruising altitude," she told the group in general, then looked at Morgan. "I have four men riding

with the road crew and the equipment. One of them will glue himself to Todd Mullins, just in case."

Dallas raised his eyebrows. "You think someone will make a try for my road manager? What for? I thought it was me they were after."

"We're not taking any chances," she told him. "If they can't get to you personally they may try other avenues—your staff, your equipment, anything."

Morgan chuckled. "I'm sure Todd's ecstatic about have security people looking over his shoulder. He's got a real sense of ownership about the roadies and the equipment. And his personal space."

"Too bad. This is not a normal situation. Everyone has to adapt."

The steward pulled in the stairs and locked the door and in a moment they heard the whine of the engine starting and felt the slight vibration in the cabin. Dallas watched Charley through deliberately half-closed eyes. She was all business, settling herself in her seat before pulling folders from her briefcase and opening one. She seemed totally engrossed in what she was reading, unaware of anyone else in the cabin. But Dallas would have bet money she was as hyperaware of him as he was of her.

Why hadn't he been able to tell her how much his music meant to him all those years ago? How he spent every minute he could scrape together writing songs? How he paid his dues in one grungy band after another until he could get enough gigs to pull his own crew together? Why had he let her think it was just a hobby he wanted to chase, not his life's dream?

Who'd have thought something this bizarre would bring them back together?

A hand on his arm jerked him out of his reverie and he looked up to see the steward standing beside him.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you, Mr. Creed. Would you like something to eat?"

"No thanks." He shook his head. The flight was only about an hour. "I'll eat when we get to Fort Worth. But I will take some coffee. Black."

"How about some pub mix? We always carry it for snacks."

"Not if it has peanuts in it. Anyway, I really don't feel like eating right now."

He knew caffeine was the last thing he needed. Between Charley's presence and the specter of the killer stalking him, his nerves were raw. But the caffeine kept him going and it was definitely better than drugs. He wasn't going down that road again.

"Still got that peanut allergy?" Charley asked without looking up from her work.

"It never goes away. Everyone around me knows not to let so much as one nut sneak through in any way, shape or form."

She nodded then raised her head from her folders and looked from him to Morgan. "Is this the same band you had the last time around? And the same road crew?"

"Some of them. Others had signed on for different gigs they were settled into and no longer available so we recruited new players."

"What about the road crew?" she asked.

Dallas set his coffee mug down hard. "You think one of these guys is after me? Charley, we practically live together. I know them. If you're looking for answers there then you're on the wrong track. You might as well back off the case."

"Dallas," Morgan began.

"No, it's all right." Charley waved him off. "I would expect Dallas to feel that way. If he didn't think he could trust his band or roadies they shouldn't be working for him."

Dallas would have defended his people more if not for the fact the copilot appeared in the cabin and bent down to whisper something in Charley's ear. Her face set in grim lines as she listened.

"I'll be right back," she told them as she turned and followed the copilot to the cockpit.

Dallas looked at his brother. "Now what?"

Morgan shrugged. "I'm sure we'll find out in a minute. Don't forget, Charley's got an agency to run too. She's doing us a favor running this contract herself."

"She doesn't need to do me any favors," Dallas grumbled. "If she's so damn busy she can get someone else to take her place."

Dallas would have said more but Charley hurried back into the cabin, pulling her cell phone from her pocket as she took her seat.

"Well?" Dallas raised his eyebrows. "Someone back on the farm misbehaving?"

"I think we're done with the wisecracks," she shot back. "My agent riding with the band had security at the airport patch him through to this plane. For some reason his cell couldn't get through. Their plane had a problem landing."

Dallas gripped the arms of his chair. "What? What the hell does that mean? Was there something wrong with the plane? Damn it. For all the business I give those people they should make sure their damn planes are properly maintained."

"They landed safely," Charley told him in a quiet but tight voice. "Everyone's all right. There was a problem with the landing gear. I spoke to one of my men riding with them. There's a possibility it was sabotaged."

"Sabotaged?" Dallas felt suddenly lightheaded. "How the hell did that happen? You said you had guards on the plane at the hangar."

"Only since about five this morning," Charley told him. "We got them out as soon as I got to the office. But that left the time between midnight when the plane landed from its previous trip and when my guys got there." She looked at Morgan. "Maybe we should have had this conversation a day earlier."

Dallas ground his teeth. He hated every minute of this. The whole situation. Everything.

"I never should have agreed to the tour," he spat out. "I didn't want it to begin with. If I'd just shut Sawyer down or gone to someone else, stuck with just the recording thing, none of this would have happened."

"You don't know that," Charley pointed out. "We have no idea what triggered this. That's the first thing I need to find out."

"Preparing to land, everyone." The pilot's voice came over the cabin speakers. "Buckle up."

"Dallas, as soon as we land I'm getting you and Morgan to the hotel. The band will already be there. I've called the office and someone's already checking into the situation with the original charter. And I'll make the arrangements for the next leg of the tour." She dialed a number on her cell phone, then looked at Dallas while she waiting for the call to be answered. "And please do not give me crap about anything. This is your life we're talking about here."

He couldn't help the smile that curved his lips. "Yes ma'am. Whatever you say."

As pissed off as he was about the whole situation, he couldn't deny what a pleasure it was to watch Charley at work. She was, very simply, poetry in motion. Efficient, intelligent, sharp, sure of herself, but never for once losing her femininity, even in a male-dominated business. The ache in his groin that had blossomed when she walked into his trailer the night before was steadily growing into a full-blown pain. One that he was sure he couldn't do anything about.

Charley spoke briefly into her phone, giving crisp orders, then stuck the phone back in her jacket pocket and looked at Dallas.

"You realize that everyone but the people right here thought you'd be on that plane."

Dallas felt a chill race through him. "At least that lets Sawyer out," he pointed out.

Morgan shook his head. "He's taking a commercial flight this afternoon. He told me about it. He had a meeting with Creative Solutions about the new merchandise so he won't be with the band."

Everyone looked at each other.

"I'm not ruling anyone out at this point," Charley said slowly, "but it hardly seems he'd kill his money machine. Still, someone should have told me he wouldn't be with us. It's important I know where everyone is at all times."

Morgan shrugged. "Sorry. That one's on me. Anyway, we need to look for someone with the knowledge of a plane's equipment."

"Or money to hire someone," she said.

Morgan scowled. "That means every form of travel has to be completely vetted."

She nodded. "Damn straight. I'll call in whoever I have to in order to get it done. Where will Sawyer go when he lands? To the hotel?"

"No. To the local distributor like he does every time. We have merchandise at each stop on the tour," Morgan explained. "T-shirts, CDs, programs, to sell at the concerts. Sawyer always goes there first to check the inventory and make sure everything came in that he wanted. That's where he gets the final list he gives me before each show."

"So who's the distributor?"

"There's a different one at each stop. The one here Sawyer's used for a long time," Morgan told her, giving her the name. "Everything comes out of a central warehouse in California. Sawyer's like a mother hen with that stuff, checking it in, watching how much gets sold. Stuff like that."

Charley frowned. "If you did that before, there should have been a bonanza of money. What happened to it?"

"I pissed it away," Dallas spat. "Okay? Can we please not discuss this anymore?" He was getting tired of all his warts being exposed to broad daylight. Maybe he'd be better off if they just let whoever this was shoot him and be done.

"All right." Charley made a note in her smartphone. "But from now on I want everyone's location at all times. And I'm sending someone to check out the distributor." She looked at Dallas. "And before you pitch a fit, it's just part of the routine. *Everything* gets scrutinized. Who knows? Maybe it's the merchandise guy who's after your ass. I have to check it out."

"Charley?" The pilot's voice came through the cabin speaker. "We'll be landing in a few minutes. Is everyone's seat belt is fastened?"

Charley pressed a button in the arm of her chair. "Taking care of it." She looked at everyone. "All right. Get strapped in. When we get to the hotel we're going to have a council of war."

Chapter Six

We followed the same procedure deplaning as we had when we'd boarded — Roper guards next to Dallas at all times. Just to confuse anyone who might have been watching, I split everyone up into three vehicles before telling the drivers to pull into the first parking structure we came to so I could switch everyone around. I could barely hold onto my temper on the ride to the hotel. I felt as if I'd jumped onto a ferris wheel in mid-circuit. I'm sure I drove my team babysitting the band crazy by calling every ten minutes, but I had the feeling things were slipping out of control and we hadn't even started.

Despite the fact I was glued to my cell phone, I was painfully aware of Dallas sitting beside me, watching me from beneath the brim of a faded Houston Texans cap. By tonight I would have everyone organized, Mike would be taking the night shift and I could have some privacy and take a deep breath.

Chase Malone, whose ten-man team was riding herd on the band and road crew, had changed all the room assignments per my instructions. The hotel hadn't been happy about making all the switches, but a little palm greasing smoothed the way. He'd also made arrangements for me to take everyone in through the kitchen and up the service elevator. Not that people wouldn't find out eventually where Dallas was staying, but I was delaying exposure as long as I could. Chase had been with me since I opened the agency and had an incredible knack for smoothing out wrinkles. I always breathed a little easier when he was on the job.

"Jacquie called after she talked to you," Chase told me. "I made arrangements for the band to rehearse at a sound studio owned by a friend of mine."

I grinned at him. Chase seemed to have friends everywhere we needed them. "What would we do without you and your 'friends'."

"This one wants two backstage passes to the concert tomorrow night."

I looked at Morgan.

He nodded. "I can make that happen."

"Okay, good." Chase looked at the list in his hand again. "The band members all brought their instruments on the flight with them." One corner of his mouth crooked in a wry grin. "Even the drummer, for shit's sake. You should have seen *that* little ballet dance."

I shrugged. "We've handled that before. What else?"

"We took the instruments to the sound studio for rehearsal. The truck with all the sound equipment in it is locked up tight as a drum at a storage facility owned by another guy I know." He looked at Morgan again, who smiled and nodded silent

agreement to the implied question. "Okay. Good. I'll tell him he can party with the big boys tomorrow night." He glanced at Dallas and back to me again. "Mullins isn't too happy about being separated from the equipment."

"Because it's his responsibility." The comment came from Dallas, who hadn't said anything up until now. "If it gets screwed up it's his ass."

"I can promise you nothing will happen to it," Chase assured him. "We'll take him to get it in the morning and escort everyone to the stadium where the concert's being held. They'll have plenty of time to set up." He looked at Dallas. "Sound check at four, right?"

Dallas nodded. "Then I usually grab some dinner with Morgan and go back to the concert site."

"Tomorrow I'll be having food brought in for you instead," I told him. "What kind of setup do we have, trailers or indoor dressing rooms?"

"Trailers again," Morgan answered.

I shook my head, chewing the inside of my cheek. "Chase, you'll need to scout the area like you're looking for gold. And make sure we have enough support to and from the stage."

"All set. I talked with Mike in the hallway and he and I will coordinate both for the rehearsal and the big show."

"I also want someone to check out the merchandise distributor for this concert." I gave him the name and address. "I'm not saying he's a suspect but I don't want to overlook anything either."

"Consider it done."

I finally drew a full breath when everyone was in their assigned places in the hotel and at last it was just the three of us in the two-bedroom suite I'd reserved for Dallas. He stood by the window, staring out at Fort Worth, hands in his pockets, tension riding the lines of his body. Morgan, on the other hand, was more at ease than I'd have expected.

"I'm impressed, Charley." He fetched two bottles of water from the minibar and one of orange juice, tossing one water to me and the juice to his brother. "You have a very well-oiled piece of machinery in that organization of yours."

I shrugged. "I learned a lot from my former employers."

"Why'd you leave the FBI, Charley?" Dallas startled me with the question.

"What?"

"I asked you why you left the feds. That was your dream. Right? All you talked about."

Was that sarcasm or genuine interest? Was he still bitter after all these years? Wait a minute. *I* was the one who should be bitter. "I reached a point where I wanted something a little bit more than what I got from the government. Fewer restrictions, a little more latitude."

And out from under a boss who was a chauvinist throwback and gave me every shit case that came along. If it had been up to him I'd have been assigned to the office in Juneau, Alaska, but I was just too damn good to justify it.

"Besides," I added, "Hillcroft offered me too much money to refuse."

Dallas was still staring out the window but I felt as if his eyes were boring into me. "I guess they gave you a good start. Morgan says you've got a great reputation for this kind of stuff."

"I work hard. So does my staff." What was I supposed to say to that?

"I'm glad to see you got what you wanted." He paused. "If that's what you wanted."

Okay, now I was through discussing me. "I think we should order lunch before we take you to rehearsal. Morgan? That good with you?"

"Yeah, fine. Let me get the room-service menu."

"It's fine with me too," Dallas said from his position at the window. "Although nobody asked me. I'm just the client."

"No, you're not." I could see the anger flash across Morgan's face. "I'm the client. You said this was all a big fuss over nothing." He turned to me. "I'm going to drop my suitcase in my room. I'm just next door so I'll be right back. Try not to kill each other while I'm gone. Just order me a roast beef sandwich, Charley, okay?"

He closed the door just a little too hard when he left.

"You better take that burr out of your ass, Dallas," I snapped. "This is no laughing matter and we can't make it work if you continue to be an idiot about it."

He spun away from the window and was beside me in three quick strides, his fingers closing over my wrist. "How about a little truth, Charley."

He was completely in my space, so close to me a piece of paper would get stuck between us. He might be older and more used up but the rampant sexual heat was still there between us and the flare of it terrified me. I closed my eyes to hide what I felt, but his fingers tightened fractionally.

"It's still there." Statement, not question. "Look at me, Charley. Tell me you didn't feel it the minute you walked into that trailer. Just like I did."

Silently I cursed my traitorous body, the way his touch and his words made my nipples harden into diamond points and the lips of my cunt swell with desire.

Shit, shit, shit.

Before I could even take a breath, his other hand gripped my face and those lips I'd remembered every night since the last time I'd tasted them came down on mine with ferocious hunger.

The slightly rough surface of his lips, the heat of his mouth, the possessive greediness of the kiss brought back every memory I'd worked so hard to bury. When his tongue pushed inside and sought mine, I was lost. Truly lost.

I couldn't move. Not just because Dallas had me gripped in both hands but because my legs were so weak I wasn't sure they'd even hold me upright, and my brain had suddenly gone on vacation. When he finally lifted his head I was dazed and shaking. What the hell had just happened? What had I *let* happen?

We were still pressed together, tightly enough that I could feel his rock-hard erection hard against me through the worn denim of his jeans. Age and circumstance apparently hadn't diminished that part of his anatomy at all.

"Go ahead, Charley." His mouth was still only a breath away from mine. "Tell me you didn't feel that the way I did. Tell me it didn't affect you one bit. And tell me there hasn't been a piece of your life missing all these years."

I wanted to say something, anything. Deny this...whatever *this* was. But my brain was still out to lunch. All I could do was look into those older and wiser smoky gray eyes and wish I could turn back time.

"It's still there, Charley." His warm breath feathered across my mouth. "And it's been there all these years." Abruptly he dropped his hands and took a step back. "Let's order lunch. You need to get me to rehearsal."

I opened my mouth, couldn't say anything, and cleared my throat. "Dallas," I began.

He picked up the room-service menu. "Later. And you can damn well be sure you won't be running away this time."

I was still standing in the same place, shocked into immobility, when a knock sounded at the door, startling me into movement.

"It's me," Morgan called. "Open up."

I unstuck my feet and went to get the door. Morgan strode in then stopped, looking first at Dallas and then at me.

"Okay. Somebody want to tell me what happened in the almost no time while I was gone?"

"Nothing." I cleared my throat again. I felt as if the entire hotel was stuck in it. "Nothing at all. We were looking at the menu. I'm just placing the order for lunch now. Dallas, you still addicted to club sandwiches?"

"Yes."

"All right."

Morgan narrowed his eyes, too aware of the charged air he'd walked into. "Everything all right?"

"Fine."

"Fine."

Dallas and I answered at the same time. Then I distracted myself by picking up the phone and dialing room service. Fiddling with the phone. Placing the order. I looked at my BlackBerry, which had just signaled an incoming text. "Chase just let me know our man checked with Sawyer at the distributor's and nothing's out of order there. They

showed him the boxes of stuff and let him paw through them. Will Sawyer be at the rehearsal?"

Morgan shook his head. "No, but he'll probably show up at sound check. Make sure everything's taken care of on the promoter's end."

"Okay then. Dallas, you need to know I've got people at my office checking into every part of your life to see if there's a spider in the corner somewhere." I waited for him to comment. "I mean everything. We have no idea where this threat is coming from."

He shrugged. "Fine. Whatever." His back was still to me but the lines of tension in his body were unmistakable.

I had to figure out how to cut the tension in this room. But Morgan, for whatever reason, did it for me.

"Your case is in the bedroom," he told his brother. "Why don't you check the guitar out and go over the music while we wait for lunch?"

Dallas turned around at last, his face unreadable. "Fine. Good idea."

If anyone said *fine* one more time I was going to scream. But Dallas stalked off to the bedroom and closed the door. Hard.

"All right." Morgan's gaze was steely. "You want to tell me what the hell is going on? Did I make a mistake here, Charley? Should I have gotten someone else? Are you still so bitter you can't do your job?"

Far from it, I wanted to say. "We're good, Morgan," I said instead.

"Good?" He lifted an eyebrow. "You're so uptight you're vibrating and Dallas looks like he could spit nails."

I smoothed my hands down the sides of my slacks. "We have some rough edges to smooth out, Morgan, but we're good. Really. Leave it alone. Please."

Deliberately I took out my cell phone, walked to the window and punched in numbers. I knew Jacquie didn't need me to check on things, but I had to divert Morgan's attention from me and pull myself together. What a mess. I could only hope that by the time the rehearsal was over Dallas would be ready to go to sleep. He hadn't had much the night before and stress really tired a person out. Hopefully he'd be exhausted when we got back to the hotel and interested only in dinner and bed. And not with me. The bed, anyway.

Lunch was a quiet meal, and strained. We chewed, we drank, we swallowed. Morgan continued to glance back and forth between Dallas and me. I could tell he was biting his tongue to keep from stepping in it, for which I was truly grateful. I finally turned on the television just to have some background noise. By the time we'd finished eating it was time to leave for rehearsal.

Thank god.

* * * * *

I was eager to get to the rented studio where everyone would gather. I wanted to get a good look at all of them – band members, road crew, everyone – for myself. Watch them all interact with Dallas. Get a reading on who might possibly be involved in this. They were a motley crew, typical of the music business, long hair and short, trimmed beards or stubble, jeans and worn t-shirts. All with cowboy hats or ball caps. Everyone had the same degree of scruffiness so it wasn't until the band took up its instruments that I could even distinguish the musicians from the roadies.

I tried to relax and assess them all while they all went through their routines – tuning instruments, checking music, getting the ever-present bottles of water they drank. Except of course for Dallas, who was still obviously an orange juice freak and guzzled a pint of it before picking up his guitar. I noticed that Todd had placed a small cooler on a table nearby for him to access whenever he needed more.

It took every bit of my willpower not to fidget through the rehearsal. But the moment I heard that whiskey-rough voice coming through the speakers in the sound booth, shards of anguish speared through me and my pulse tried to hammer its way out of my veins. Even though Dallas wasn't looking directly at me, I knew he was acutely aware of me, a connection that pulsed between us as if the wall of glass separating the sound booth from the recording room didn't even exist. Again I was transported to a honky-tonk, the air thick with the odor of smoke and beer and the sound of Dallas' voice like an erotic temptation reaching out from the stage. I had to curl my fingers and dig my nails into the palms of my hands to keep from doing something and making a fool of myself.

It's over, Charley. Nothing's changed except you're both older. Tormenting yourself with what might have been is a loser's game.

Still, it was hard not to feel that combination of pain and longing that always swept through me whenever I thought of Dallas Creed or heard snatches of his music. I slid my glance sideways to Morgan, standing at the other side of the mixing board, and saw him watching me intently. His eyes held a far-too-knowing look.

Damn him. I'd let him push me into this against my better judgment and now he watched me flailing on a sea of my own emotions. I had a childish desire to smack his face. Especially when he gave me that famous Creed grin.

Chase reported that Sawyer was in his room at the hotel making phone calls and taking care of business. Fine. As long as I knew where he was. People had been coming in and out of the sound booth for the last fifteen minutes. Todd. A couple of the roadies. I looked around the studio, trying to get a sense of where everyone was, and saw Chase opening the door to the parking lot. He stepped outside and in seconds was herding both Randy and Todd inside. What was that all about? I left the sound booth and went over to where they were arguing.

"I just wanted to get a damn cigarette," Randy spat. "Just a smoke. So sue me."

"And I needed something out of the truck we came in," Todd snarled. "Fuck, I hardly got the back door open before your guy was on my ass. This is just shit."

"No one goes anywhere without a Roper guard with them," I told them in a flat tone. "You know that."

"Fine, fine, fine." Todd stomped back into the sound booth.

Randy just edged into the studio and leaned into a corner.

At long last the rehearsal ended. The band packed away its instruments and Chase went about the efficient business of herding them and the road crew into guarded vehicles and getting them back to the hotel. Todd gathered up his yellow pad with notes on it and announced he was going to check out the venue where the concert was being held the next night.

"I need to diagram the setup," he told me, then looked at Morgan. "You know I always do that. This is nothing new."

"I'll have somebody take you," I said.

"No." His face closed up. I remembered that he'd been the one to find Dallas in his truck at the bottom of the ravine. I had a feeling he blamed me for what happened in some way and his dislike for me was very evident. "I know what's going on here, Ms. Roper. No one's after me. I'll take a cab there and back." He paused and then said with heavy sarcasm, "Since we're not allowed to rent our own vehicles like we always do."

"You'll have to excuse him." Morgan's mouth was quirked up in a half-grin. "Road managers aren't known for their pleasing personalities, and Todd's trying to win the award for the most irritating."

"Damn it, I just need to do my job."

"And I need to do mine," I pointed out, doing my best to be calm. "And please. Call me Charley."

"Well, *Charley*." He almost spat my name. "The quicker I get out of here, the quicker I get my job done. And besides, I'm not the target." Without waiting for me to say anything else, he picked up his things and stomped out of the studio. Mike nodded to me and spoke into his radio. I knew he'd have Chase reassign someone to go with Todd. Too bad if the jerk didn't like it.

I looked at Morgan.

"Okay, so he's an ass," Morgan agreed.

"And someone to keep an eye on," I pointed out.

"Hey, Todd's just...Todd. He does a damn good job and he's very loyal to Dallas."

I nodded. "And no one's exempt here."

I looked through the big window into the studio and saw Dallas, guitar case in his hand, watching the little byplay intently. Hauling in a deep breath, I let it out slowly, steadying myself.

"You okay, Charley?" Morgan narrowed his eyes.

"I'm fine. I have a job to do and I'm doing it."

"Okay. Let's go." He opened the door to the sound booth for me.

We piled into the SUV, Mike driving again, and headed back to the hotel. Morgan was in the front seat while I had Dallas in the backseat with me, I could feel his eyes on me behind those ever-present sunglasses. I was rigid with irritation and trying desperately not to show it. Turning slightly away from him, I checked the text messages on my BlackBerry. I'd turned it off at the studio so it wouldn't be a distraction, but now I had a flood of messages to deal with. I decided I'd call the office when we got back to the hotel and I had some privacy.

We were back on the interstate, merging into the flow of oncoming traffic, when I felt a thump resonate through the vehicle and it began to slew sideways.

I looked at Mike and saw him wrestling with the wheel, trying to steady the SUV. Morgan was hanging onto the "oh shit" strap in front, trying to balance himself. We were skidding across two lanes of traffic, swerving to face in the wrong direction, horns blasting at us as Mike worked furiously to save us from a head-on collision. Somehow he managed to get the car to the shoulder and come to a stop. My nails had dug crescents into my palms and I was sweating. I slid a glance to Dallas, sitting stiff beside me, his face unreadable behind those dark glasses.

"Good job," I told Mike.

"Yeah. I'll check the tire but I'm guessing someone tinkered with it while we were inside the studio. That means guards on all vehicles at all times from now on."

He released his seat belt and got out of the SUV. In a moment he was knocking on my window and I lowered it.

"I need to change the tire," he said in a voice far too casual. Okay. That meant he'd found something. "Let's be quick about it."

"We better get out," Dallas said, moving to open his door.

"I can help with the tire," Morgan put in.

I slapped a hand on Dallas' arm. "Nobody gets out," I ordered. "Mike can change it with us still in here."

"Don't be stupid," he said. "Our weight is too much to jack up."

He was sitting on the side away from traffic and there was little I could do to stop him when he jerked his door open. I scrambled across the seat and tried to push him down so the SUV shielded him.

"Charley, they already tried their stunt with the tire," he pointed out. "I'm sure they expected a fatal accident out of it. If Mike wasn't such a good driver who the hell knows what would have happened."

Morgan was out the front passenger door, trying to calm his brother and check to see if Mike needed his help.

As I stood there arguing with him a brown van came speeding down the lane nearest us, the passenger window open. Only years of training and gut instinct allowed me to yank hard on Dallas' arm, pulling him down as a bullet hit the concrete safety

wall where only a moment ago he'd been standing. I yanked out my gun but the van was long gone, blending into the traffic and speeding away.

I looked at Mike. "We need to boogie out of here. Now." I was already shoving Dallas back into the vehicle.

Morgan leaped into the front seat and buckled in.

I could see Dallas was shaken by the incident. He didn't argue when I made him stay in a crouched position while Mike finished changing the tire, Morgan helping him.

"This was definitely no accident," Mike said as he tightened the last of the lug nuts. He rolled the tire toward me and I could see where four nails had been pounded into it.

"Damn." I shook my head. "This isn't our style, putting our clients in jeopardy. We need to get a handle on things immediately."

I wondered if I was letting myself be so distracted by the contact with Dallas after all this time that I wasn't as sharp at my game as I should be. The thought made me very uncomfortable. I finally breathed easier when we were all back in the vehicle and heading toward the hotel.

We finished the trip in tense silence. I continued to watch through the tinted windows and breathed a small sigh of relief when we pulled into the underground parking. Mike got out and scanned the area before opening the door for Dallas and the two of us took him in through the kitchen again, Morgan right behind us. Up in the suite Mike went into his own room to deal with the rental company about a new tire for the SUV, closing the door. I knew he'd try to get some rest too, so he could sleep lightly at night. Mike was the master of the power nap.

Ignoring both Morgan and me, Dallas went to the minibar and I tensed, expecting him to reach for one of the miniature drinks and slug it down. Instead he pulled out a bottle of orange juice and went to stand by the window.

"How the hell did someone know where Dallas was going to rehearse?" Morgan demanded. "And how could they know when and plan something like this?"

He was angry, and justifiably so, but no more than I was. All our careful planning and someone was sabotaging it. I knew what I was about to say would set off fireworks, so I braced myself for it.

"I've been very careful with all our arrangements," I pointed out. "That means it has to be someone connected with someone in the band."

"I know everyone in the band." Dallas' voice was hard. "Road crew too. I'd vouch for every one of them."

"What about Randy?" Morgan asked in a soft voice.

"No, damn it." Dallas tossed the empty juice bottle in the trash. "Not him."

"What *about* Randy?" I asked. "I don't have the full report on everyone yet so if there's something I need to know, spit it out."

Morgan scowled. "He used to be one of two rhythm guitar players for Dallas. He was in the truck when it rolled. His hand was smashed against the door and the doctors weren't able to repair it enough so he could play again."

"He must be a very angry person," I said.

"Wouldn't you be?" Dallas spat out. "But I look out for him. Made sure Sawyer got him gigs on crews before I put the band back together. Now he's second behind Todd."

"And he hates your guts."

"He used to be a crack shot with a rifle," Morgan reminded his brother. "Did a lot of hunting."

"Is his hand healed enough that he can shoot okay?"

"It's not him," Dallas insisted, voice raised. "There's got to be someone else."

"He tried to sneak out to the parking lot. Todd too."

"I saw them," Dallas said. "Neither of them were gone for more than a few seconds before Chase reeled them back in. And where would they get a van in such a short time?"

"Whoever this is could have someone helping him," I pointed out. "Neither of those men knows enough to fiddle with a plane, and it wasn't either of them shooting at you. Dallas, do you think maybe any of them hold a grudge against you because you derailed the gravy train when you crashed?"

Pain carved sharp lines in his face. "I hope to god not. Sawyer made sure they stayed in the business, got good gigs."

"But not making the same money, I'm sure."

"All I can tell you is they were all happy to be back on board."

I shoved my hands in the pockets of my slacks and went to stand by the window. I didn't want to see Dallas when I asked the next question. "What about women? Any of them who got left by the wayside who might be carrying a grudge?"

"Charley," Morgan began in a warning voice.

"It's okay," Dallas said.

I made myself turn to look at him.

"Charley, the plain truth is no one was around long enough for that. I can hardly remember any of their names. And I sure as hell didn't give any of them the idea they had a future with me." When he looked at me his eyes were filled with self-loathing. "Sure you still want to stick around?"

An ache in my chest I hadn't even realized was there eased and warmth slid through me. Whatever Dallas had been and done, he was still regretting it. And that more than anything told me the kind of person he was now.

"I'm calling the office. They should have at least a bare bones report for me on everyone by now." I walked out into the hall, needing to put space between Dallas and me.

Usually when a famous or notorious person was in danger the guilty party was fairly easy to identify. I hated situations like this, when there was a chance the target's safety was being jeopardized by someone close to him. I had to look at all possibilities including getting as much data as possible on Randy Mueller. I'd also have Chase and his team keep a closer eye on him. But I agreed that if it was him, he had outside help. So where was he getting it from?

"Any background checks ready for me?" I asked as soon as Jacquie answered.

"Yes," she told me. "Just got the complete file. I'll send it to your email right now. My." I could almost hear the sigh in her voice. "Dallas Creed certainly leads a colorful life."

"That he does." Maybe too colorful. "And I want deeper checks on every member of the band and the road crew. I'll check back later."

"Okay, I'll send you what we've got right now."

When I swiped the key card and walked back into the suite Dallas was still at the window and Morgan was leaning against a wall. The tension was so thick you could slice it.

I cleared my throat. "All right. Let's not have a jungle fight here. You both should know I'll do whatever it takes to protect you, Dallas, and to find out who's doing this. So quit pissing up a rope and let's try to relax. After dinner, Mike and I will go over tomorrow's schedule again. Todd should be back with his diagrams and we can see where the danger spots are at the venue. It will give me a chance to assess him better too."

"That sounds like a plan," Morgan said. "You'll have to forgive my brother, Charley. Most of the band members have been with him a long time. When he started the climb again he was able to bring nearly everyone back, so they have a strong bond."

"You said almost everyone." I pulled out my smartphone and tapped to get the file I wanted. "Which one of these guys is new?"

Dallas chugged from the water bottle. "Andy Young. Rhythm guitar. His stepbrother, Deacon, is my bass player." He added, almost defensively, "He's a good kid."

"I'm sure he is." I did my best to keep the edge out of my voice. Snapping at Dallas would get me no place.

"Deacon brought him along to audition when Dallas put the band back together," Morgan added.

"All right." I texted Jacquie, then put my electronics away just as a knock sounded on the door. I opened it to let Chase into the suite.

"How about hanging out here while I go take care of some stuff?" I asked. "Then we'll have dinner, get Todd in here to go over the layout of the arena and maybe get some sleep. Mike should poke his head out of his room pretty soon."

He nodded and made himself comfortable in one of the big chairs.

It was a relief to get into my room and away from the boiling sea of testosterone I'd been floating in. I set up the portable printer I always carry along in case there was something I wanted in hard copy and then hooked up my netbook. I loved it because it was small enough to fit in a large purse with my other junk. In the few minutes it took to boot up and recognize the printer, I replayed everything in my mind, from the moment we'd landed in Fort Worth, trying to look for a crack in the operation. To figure out who'd been out of sight long enough to damage the tire and who was in the brown van.

We'd made sure no one saw him going in and out of the hotel, changed all the room assignments, taken his name off everything and not told anyone where the rehearsal was until the very last minute. I ground my teeth in frustration. Somewhere we were missing something but I didn't know what. Yet. I desperately needed those background checks.

When I was able to access my emails, I brought up the reports Jacquie had forwarded and printed them out. Not as much as I would have liked, but a start. I read the list of band members, trying to see beyond the brief descriptions. Some of them had been with Dallas from the beginning, when he was paying his dues in honky-tonks and ratty bars. Others had been pulled in when the first big tour was scheduled, the one where he'd been the opening act for The John Collins Band.

All of them would know about his peanut allergy. Including Sawyer Black and Todd Mullins.

James Blakely, 45, drums

No criminal record, married and divorced twice, no children

Nothing from neighbors except he's gone all the time on the road

I remembered him from those first gigs in college. Lanky, lean, morose. He attracted a lot of women but never stayed with any of them very long. I was surprised he'd even gotten married, not once, but twice, but the divorces certainly were no shocks. I made a note to make sure someone interviewed the ex-wives.

Hank Stratton, 44, rhythm guitar

Short and muscular, bearded, one arrest fifteen years prior for drunk and disorderly

No marriages, no children that we know of. Yet.

When he's not on the road he has a cabin in northern Texas where he fishes

Lavell Hansen, 41, synthesizer

Married, one child, no criminal record

Deacon Young, 43, bass guitar

Married and divorced three times, two children

Jacquie had added that the two wives with whom Deacon had children were constantly hauling him into court for child support. I'd have someone talk to the two

women and find out if Deacon was delinquent or if they were just greedy. If he needed money there could be something there, although how killing Dallas would help him I had yet to figure out.

Andy Young, 24, second rhythm guitar

Stepbrother to Deacon, son of the senior Young's second wife

No additional information at this time

A kid, like Morgan had said. Twenty-one when his stepbrother gave him the chance to audition for Dallas. Still, kids got into trouble, and maybe he knew someone who had a grudge against Dallas Creed. Something else to check into.

Nolan "Grunge" James, 45, banjo and fiddle

Another one I remembered from the early days. A long list of traffic tickets over the years for speeding but that was it. Hard drinker, hard player. Married. I wanted to meet the woman who'd put a rope around this man.

Randy Mueller, 38

Single, badly injured in the accident where Dallas rolled his truck

Worked as a roadie locally until Dallas began touring again, then joined his crew

Minor rap sheet for bar fights

Has a reputation for having anger management problems and carrying a grudge

Also known as a loner. No close relatives or friends

So if he was the one, where was he getting help? And why had he waited all this time to do something? Was he just too obvious? I'd make sure we had eyes on him all the time. Nothing in any of their credit histories that waved a red flag at me but we'd dig more into backgrounds. See if there was more to find. Maybe someone who hated Dallas enough to arrange for someone to kill him. Or do it themselves.

That's all at first pass, Jacquie had added. Doing the usual interviews and database scans but nothing has turned up on any of them so far.

Wonderful. Just great.

I reread all the reports on the previous incidents. Nothing new there. Not even my own agents' reports on the shooting attempt at the concert, which I combed word by word. I still didn't have the complete history on Dallas. Maybe there was someone in his past rearing his—or her—ugly head. Maybe he'd really pissed someone off and they were finally getting revenge. And then there was Todd and Sawyer. Long shots. I didn't really think either of them would kill the goose laying so many golden eggs for them but I couldn't afford to overlook anyone.

I emailed back to remind Jacquie I need something on the road crew too and shut down the little minicomputer. Leaning back in the chair, I massaged my temples. I had the gut-churning feeling there were too many pieces of spaghetti falling out of this particular bowl and I'd need a really big set of tongs to gather them in. There was nothing pointing to anything. Period.

Okay, Charley. Time to pull up your big-girl pants and handle things. Keep Dallas alive. Find the bad guys. Put them away. And don't give an inch to the man who broke your heart.

* * * * *

We ate dinner in the room, a solemn, silent group, wrapped in tension so thick it was almost visible. Mike was his usual alert self. The power nap had refreshed him, and although he'd crawl into his bed tonight I knew he'd sleep lightly. He was blessed with the ability to fall instantly and dreamlessly into sleep. Tomorrow morning I'd give him time to rest when I took over.

Although Dallas didn't exactly stare at me, I was aware of every minute he focused his attention on me. Morgan gave up trying to make light conversation and just concentrated on his food. I chewed and swallowed with no idea of what I ate or what it tasted like. Finally the endless meal was over and Mike wheeled the table out into the hallway just as Todd arrived with the diagrams of the Macpherson Arena where the concert was being held.

"Sawyer's in his room if you need him," he said in his laconic voice. "Making more calls. I think he lives on that damn phone. If you need him I'll go get him but really, I've got whatever you need."

"Fine," Morgan told him. "Let's get started."

All the things that made the organization work were Todd's responsibility and it was obvious he resented Morgan inserting himself into it. Putting himself between Dallas and everyone else.

I called Chase to join us and we spent the next hour with the sheets of paper spread out on the table, marking danger spots where we needed to hire extra local security. Todd had indicated where every piece of equipment would be placed, the instruments, the speakers, the microphones. Lines like snakes marked the scrolling pattern of cables that hooked everything together and to the power source. He'd even included the lighting plan, and the direction in which each stage light would face.

It wasn't new to me. Roper Protective Services had babysat and protected enough musicians to know the complicated setup required to stage a show. But now I was looking for weak spots, for places where someone could sabotage the performance and place something to injure Dallas.

"Who checks the electrical safety?" I wanted to know.

"I do." Todd looked at me, his face expressionless. "Is there a problem? You want to do the final walk-through with me?"

I ignored the slight hostility in his tone. "Yes, thank you."

"We need to double-check the fireworks too," Morgan reminded him.

"Fireworks?" I frowned. "I don't remember any from last night."

"The concert arena wouldn't allow them. Not every place will. But whenever we can we have special effects for *Set Me On Fire*. When Dallas hits the final chorus we have a bar that comes down, a truss that holds light starbursts as well as containers of flash powder and sparkle."

"I'm not sure we should be using them at all. That's a definite danger spot." I shook my head. "Nope. Too chancy. Cancel them."

"They're a special part of the show," Todd objected. "You can have anyone you want check them. I make sure all the safety measures are taken. And the stuff we use doesn't require hazmat permission or anything."

I tapped my pen on the table. "Let's test them at sound check tomorrow. I'll make a decision after that. That work for you?"

He gave a curt nod.

I turned to Chase. "Have someone on the team check the merchandise when it gets to the arena."

"You think there's a killer hiding in there?" Todd's mouth curved in a nasty smirk.

"I think we need to check over everything that relates to Dallas and each performance. Now. Let's talk about getting the man to and from his trailer," I went on.

"The press always makes that a little quirky," Todd said. "They want their interviews. That's where Sawyer plays his part."

"We'll have to limit it to a specific press conference within a stated amount of time," I told him.

Again the "I couldn't care less" shrug. That wasn't his responsibility. "Take it up with Sawyer in the morning. Just be aware he wants to give the media its pound of flesh."

"We'll just have to sell them a little less tomorrow." I shoved aside my smartphone that I'd been using to make notes. "All right. Dallas, when you do your sound check tomorrow, I'll do a walk-through with my people. Mike, sound check safety will be your responsibility. And get someone to the arena early to check it out before we arrive."

"Done."

Todd picked up his yellow pad filled with notes and his roll of diagrams and left without a word. Mike was next to go, heading for his room.

"Well." Morgan stood and shoved his hands into his pockets, shifting his glance from Dallas to me and back again. "Is it safe to leave the two of you alone together?"

I managed a smile for him. "I think we can handle it."

"Then I'll see you both at eight o'clock."

And then there were two. Dallas. Me. And a space filled with sexual tension that crackled and sparked. I could almost see the tiny charges bouncing off our skin.

Chapter Seven

We stared at each other for a long moment, heat burning in Dallas' eyes. I had to pull my gaze away from his. Business, I reminded myself. Work.

"I need to check things before I leave," I said, my voice sounding strange even to myself. Damn it.

"Have at it." His voice was low, the drawl more pronounced.

All my nerve endings stood at attention and every pulse point in my traitorous body throbbed with remembered need. Enough, I told myself sternly.

I poked my head into Mike's room to remind him to sleep with his door open. I also said I'd do the walk-through of Dallas' room to make sure everything was as it should be. I was driven by the aftermath of the shooting and the feeling that I was missing something. That I wasn't as sharp as I should be. I was supposed to be so great. Well, great security agencies didn't let clients nearly get killed. I had to ignore my conflicting feelings for Dallas if I wanted to do my job properly.

In Dallas' bedroom I made a show of looking in closets and drawers, anyplace someone might have hidden an incendiary device or something equally as dangerous. People had been in and out of the suite. A clever person could have slipped in here for a moment. The last thing I did was turn the deadbolt and hook the security chain. I badly wanted to retreat to the safety of my own room, away from the net of the past threatening to ensnare me. Away from Dallas, who stirred up unwanted feelings.

I turned around and he was right there. In my space. Less than an inch from me. He'd taken his boots off and the carpet had deadened his soft footsteps. The powerful link we'd always shared, the intense attraction, slammed into me with the force of an out-of-control freight train. Exactly what I was afraid of had happened. I sucked in my breath as the muscles in my stomach clenched against the invisible blow. And stared at the man I'd tried so unsuccessfully to forget all these years.

He still smelled like Dallas, clean and earthy at the same time, a powerful scent that shot straight from my nasal passages to the suddenly pulsing spot between my thighs. An ache surged through my breasts, making my nipples harden.

If he'd made an obvious move on me I might have used my strength to push him aside and step away from the danger zone. Instead he lifted a hand to my cheek and ran the knuckles lightly over my skin. The touch wasn't sexual but the result was. Heat flared in his eyes and my body answered with a rise in temperature of its own.

Our gazes were locked tightly and my body was rooted to the floor as if I'd stepped into wet cement.

Get out of here, Charley. Danger zone.

But I couldn't move. Maybe my mind could have made my muscles obey but my brain seemed to be encased in the same substance as my feet. I could feel my heart hammering erratically against my ribs, the sound echoing through all my bones.

Move, Charley. Get the hell out of here.

I couldn't breathe. The sizzle always simmering beneath the surface when we were near each other, dormant for so long, erupted like Fourth of July fireworks. Dallas just kept stroking my cheek, his face so close his breath was a warm breeze on my skin, his eyes staring into mine as if trying to see what was written on my soul.

"I made the biggest mistake of my life with you." His words were so soft I almost didn't hear them. "I'd take everything back right now if I could."

No, you wouldn't. You wanted this more than anything else in life. Say it, Charley. Throw his words back in his face and break the spell.

Then it was too late to do anything, because he bent his head just that extra inch or so and feathered his lips against mine.

Oh god! I was well and truly lost.

His mouth kept stroking mine while his hands moved around to my braid, finding the coated band that fastened it at the end, slowly and carefully unwinding it from its complicated plait until it hung in loose waves down my back.

"I always loved your hair like this." His voice was a murmur against my lips. "Like rich, coffee-colored silk. So soft when I touched it. I dreamed about it, about touching it."

He was doing that now, sifting his fingers through it, loosening it even more. His lips were still just barely touching mine, his breath whispering into my mouth. If he'd tried to kiss me right away it might have shocked me into the reaction I needed, but he was seducing my mouth so slowly I was locked in place.

His fingers drifted through my hair, onto my shoulders and down my arms, tracing little patterns until he reached my hands. Then he linked his fingers through mine and, so slowly I had to hold my breath with anticipation, he pressed his mouth more firmly to mine and eased his tongue between my lips.

When he stroked it past my lips and into that hot cavern my body began to melt. An erotic warmth slipped over me like a second skin and I touched his tongue with my own. I'd forgotten just how incredibly good he tasted, a sensual flavor that infused itself into my system.

He didn't rush it. This wasn't like the younger Dallas, hot and eager and anxious to thrust himself inside me. No, this was a man who'd learned patience. And who also knew, I was sure, that at any moment I could snap out of whatever thrall he held me in and push him away. So he was seducing me in increments, enticing me with slow swirls of his taste and touch.

I had no idea how long we stood there like that, his tongue caressing mine, his warm breath fanning my skin, his fingers joined with mine. I was barely aware of those

same fingers moving to my rib cage, carefully tracing the indentations until they reached the swell of my breasts.

Large, warm palms cupped the aching flesh, thumbs rasped against taut nipples, electric even through the layers of fabric from blouse and bra. My skin felt too tight for me, as if it was squeezing the breath out of me.

Back and forth those thumbs went, while his very talented tongue stroked and played and teased. I heard a moan and realized it was mine. The longer the kiss went on the weaker I got, until I had to clutch Dallas' arms for support.

When he lifted his mouth at last I was dizzy from the feelings swirling inside me. The throb between my legs was like the pounding of a drum and the inner muscles of my cunt begged to be wrapped around him.

"I told you it was still there," he murmured, so softly I had to strain to hear the words. "That we still had it."

I blinked. Still had it? Had what? What did we have?

Bad memories came rushing up, pushing away the wonderful feeling creeping over me. I tried to shift enough to take even a tiny step back but Dallas tightened his fingers on my breasts.

"What are you afraid of, Charley?"

Of you.

But I couldn't say it out loud. I just stared back into his eyes as his lean fingers unbuttoned my blouse with measured slowness, then undid the front clasp of my bra and pushed both things down my arms. The chilled air of the room was cool on the heated skin of my breasts, but nothing could have cooled the heat that seared through me as Dallas lowered his mouth and closed his lips around one aching nipple.

His tongue flicked against the hard bud before pressing it against the roof of his mouth. In spite of the warning bells clanging in my brain, I leaned into the hard body of the man holding me and moaned again.

That very educated tongue obviously remembered even after all this time just exactly how to touch and lick and tease. I wanted to press the entire breast into his mouth and beg him to devour it. A little cry of protest whispered from me when he lifted his head but in an instant he had turned his attention to the other nipple, giving it the same delicious treatment.

I could feel him against me, the hard thickness of his cock pressing through the denim of his jeans and the fabric of my slacks. My juices flowed from me and I knew the crotch of my panties was soaked.

This time, when Dallas lifted his head, he moved fractionally away from me, although his hands still gripped my body.

"I want you, Charley. You have to know that."

I blinked, trying to break the mesmerizing hold he had on me. "Sex," I managed to say. "You're just horny."

He brushed his lips over mine again while he shifted his hands so his thumbs could resume their erotic dance on my nipples. My womb clenched, sending me a signal that whatever shred of sanity my brain might grasp, my body was working out there all on its own.

"Not sex," he whispered. "Don't you want to find out what it really is?"

I tried one last time. Desperately. "Was. It *was*, Dallas. In the *past*."

"Just think about now, Charley."

He pushed at my sleeves and bra straps, trying to work them off my body. I barely managed to remember my gun, tucked at the small of my back.

"Stop! Stop!" I tried to shrug away from him.

"What's wrong? Jesus, Charley, don't stop now."

"My gun." I was trying to wrestle it out from the small of my back but my hands kept getting caught in my dangling sleeves.

Dallas took a step back, giving me room to set the instrument on the nightstand, but then he was on me again. He pushed my blouse and bra the rest of the way down my arms and let them drop to the floor. His warm mouth fused to mine again as his fingers made quick work of his shirt, tossing it on top of my garments. When he pulled me hard against him, the crisp curls of hair on his chest were like tiny coils of live wire against the sensitized skin of my breasts.

My entire body was already on sensory overload and it seemed, unless I somehow found the strength to push him away, Dallas had just gotten started.

I remembered the boy with his eager and inventive lovemaking, now turned into a man who knew his way around a woman's body. I deliberately blocked any and all speculation as to who he'd taken the tour with and how many times.

Soft lips trailed along my neck as lean fingers unfastened my slacks and pushed them down my thighs to pool at my feet.

"Step out of them, Charley." His voice was low and rough with need.

I had no willpower left to refuse. I stepped out of my shoes and slacks and kicked them away.

His fingers rested on my hipbones while his mouth pressed against the hollow of my throat, capturing the pulse beating there so frantically. Thumbs slipped into the elastic at the waist of my panties and caressed the skin in light strokes. I trembled, certain I'd melt to the floor if not for my death grip on Dallas' hard-muscled arms.

So much cream had slithered into my panties that even I could smell the musk of my arousal. I knew Dallas did, by the groan that vibrated against my throat.

The hard thickness of his cock burned my naked skin through his jeans and suddenly I wanted to feel it, stroke its remembered velvet-over-steel. Dropping my hands to his waist, I pulled the snap open and lowered the zipper.

"Your turn," I whispered, shoving at the material.

"My pleasure," he murmured as he rid himself of jeans and boxers.

And then there we were, skin to skin, his shaft burning against me. I reached down and circled it with my fingers, the memory of how it used to feel so sharp and swift.

In one fluid move Dallas knocked my hand aside and lifted me in his arms, carrying me to the bed. Bending slightly, he yanked back the covers and lowered me to the sheet, arranging me so my legs were splayed, and every bit of me was open to his gaze. Standing over me, his eyes roamed hungrily, darkening as he took in every detail.

For one fleeting moment, nerves gripped me. I made it a point to keep in shape, not just for myself but because my line of work demanded it. But how did I look to the man who had last seen me in the flush of youth?

If the desire darkening his face was any indication, any flaws I might have developed were invisible to him. Then he was lying beside me, his body hot against mine. I had one last fleeting moment of sanity before we reached the point beyond control.

"Condom," I gasped.

His hands tightened on me. "I guess you won't believe me when I tell you I don't carry them around anymore."

His words stunned me. His scores of women were the stuff of legends.

"Dallas, I—"

"I'm clean, Charley. When I was in the hospital they screened and tested every inch of my body. And I haven't been with anyone since I got out."

Now there was a *real* shocker.

"No one?"

"They weren't you."

I tugged my lower lip between my teeth. "I'm clean too. I haven't—" How could I admit to my pathetic love life?

"Been with anyone for a while?" he finished for me. "Good, and not just for the safety factor." He licked my lips. "It's always been my dream to be naked inside you, darlin'. Nothing between us. Just your wet flesh gripping mine. There's not another woman in the world I'd take this chance with. Please say it's okay."

What could I do? I was on the Pill so we were covered there, and I was lost, swept away by his words.

He put his mouth close to my ear and whispered all the things he wanted to do to me, the ways he wanted to pleasure me. One lean hand smoothed the length of my body from my breasts to my cunt, probing through the nest of curls to find the wet heat there and stroking it with a gentle glide of fingers.

Instantly shards of electricity shot through me, igniting every nerve to the point of flames.

Dallas couldn't take his eyes from her, the lines of her body, the swell of her breasts, the slightly rounded shape of her tummy. He'd had erotic dreams about that body for twenty years, dreams that no amount of booze or drugs or women could reshape or erase. And from the moment she'd walked into his trailer after the concert, every emotion, every sensation, every desire he'd ruthlessly buried had leaped to life.

She still wore the same achingly familiar light floral scent, something that reminded him of a rain-washed spring morning. He was seized with a sudden need to bury himself in her essence and inhale until he couldn't draw a breath anymore. He wanted to take his time with her, savor each touch and taste, relearn the feel of her. But his cock was already hard to the point of pain and his balls were aching with need.

He reached out to turn the bedside lamp to its lowest wattage. Charley might still be pleasing to the eye but Dallas knew exactly the shape his own body was in. Just because she'd seen the scars the other night didn't mean he had to lay them out there for her scrutiny now. Careful to move his left leg quickly so he didn't draw attention to it, he knelt on the mattress between Charley's thighs, pressing them wide with his palms and bending his head to the very center of her sex.

He drew a line with his tongue the full length of her slit, pleasure rushing through him at the first sweet taste of her arousal. She whimpered, a tiny sound that made his cock flex, and he stroked her again. And again. Moving his hands from her thighs to her labia, he opened the petal-soft lips and plunged his tongue inside her cunt.

God! She tasted like every man's wet dream.

Her fingers grabbed his head, holding him close to her as her hips rose to meet his mouth. Again and again he tasted her, now withdrawing to lick her swollen clit, now pushing inside again.

"Dallas." The word floated in the air, a sigh of pleasure as well as a plea.

He closed his teeth over her clit while his fingers scooped her cream from her drenched pussy and slid down between the globes of her buttocks. Just as he remembered, that carnal stroke made the whimper turn to a cry, the breathy sound to a gasp.

And suddenly he knew he couldn't wait any longer. He lifted her to him with his palms beneath her buttocks, positioned the head of his cock at her opening, took a deep breath and plunged inside.

Sweet Jesus!

He had to grit his teeth to keep from coming at once, the feel of her inner muscles clenching around him, the lubrication of her juices so powerful he wanted to empty himself.

Taking a deep breath to center himself, he began the steady in-and-out rhythm, reveling in the voluptuous grip of her cunt as he moved. Out. In. Out. In. He kept up a fixed rhythm until the tingling at the base of his spine and the tightness in his balls told him his control had eroded.

Pumping harder, he massaged her clit with his thumb, watching her for signs that she was as close to the edge as he was. When she wrapped her legs around him to draw him in tighter, he thrust once, twice, three times. Hard, hard, hard.

And they flew into space together, cartwheeling into black velvet. Her muscles milked him, her juices bathed him, her legs held him in an iron grasp and her nails raked his back. He pumped his release into her and as spasms shook them both he shouted her name. Just the way he always had.

It seemed to take forever for the aftershocks to subside, draining their bodies of whatever energy was left to them. He fell forward as her legs dropped away, gasping to draw air into oxygen-deprived lungs. He didn't know if the thundering sound rocketing through him was his heart or hers.

And then finally they were still.

Dallas forced himself to slide from the hot grasp of her body and padded to the bathroom. When he came back carrying a warm washcloth, he was half afraid she'd be gone, but she was still lying in his bed, flushed in the aftermath of passion, watching him through heavy-lidded eyes. He took a moment to clean her tenderly.

"I almost hate for you to wipe away the trace of yourself on me," she said in a low voice. "In me."

Warmth seeped into him, easing the inner tension that had gripped him since the moment he'd first laid eyes on her again. He placed a kiss at the top of her mound, then crawled into bed beside her and pulled the covers over them. All the years he'd spent filled with regret and trying to wash Charley Roper out of his mind and his body apparently was time wasted. The moment they'd been alone together that remarkable connection flared to life. Fucking Charley was like diving into a fire and begging to be burned. And it wasn't just his body responding. It was everything.

He'd been such a stupid shit to toss it away like he had. Now he wanted it back, all of it, more than he wanted his next breath.

"I was a fool, Charley," he whispered in the dark. "A stupid, idiotic fool. All these years I was sure you hated me, and with good reason. But I'm going to convince you not to hate me anymore. Somehow."

"Oh Dallas." She exhaled a long sigh. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves here."

Typical Charley response, he thought. At least for the new, older Charley. He had no idea how they'd handle this tomorrow. For all he knew, she'd wake up angry with both of them and resentful that she'd let herself respond to him. But for tonight he could hold her in his arms.

And sleep.

Chapter Eight

When I opened my eyes, the first thought that pierced my foggy conscious state was that I was in the wrong place. The bed I was in felt strange and there was someone in it besides me. A muscular male arm was draped across my middle and soft breath teased at my ear. With a sinking feeling I slid my eyes to the right.

Shit!

Dallas Creed lay wrapped around my body, still deep in sleep, his arm holding me firmly in place. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure this one out.

I'd done it, sure enough. It hadn't been some fantasy or erotic dream. Despite the armor I wrapped myself in, despite my determination to keep this strictly professional, despite my best efforts to keep the past where it belonged, I'd had sex with Dallas Creed.

And oh god, had Mike peeked in to check on Dallas last night and seen me in bed with him?

Double shit!

I looked at the LED readout on the alarm clock. Six a.m. Time to get my act together.

Moving very slowly, taking great care not to wake the sleeping giant, I inched my way out of the bed until I was able to stand. My clothes were still in the pile where they'd been tossed the night before. I pulled on my slacks and blouse, shoved my feet into my shoes and tucked everything else under my arm. Picking up my gun, I hurried through the sitting room. I glanced at Mike's door, still ajar, but saw no movement in the room. If he knew I was sneaking out he was discreet enough not to let me know it.

When I reached my room I closed the door and locked it, leaning weakly against it. Holding my clothes to my chest like a protective shield, I closed my eyes. I couldn't believe I'd been so incredibly stupid, letting him seduce me so easily. So much for determination and an iron will. After all these years of blaming Dallas for the destruction of our relationship, did my acceptance of what was still very much between us mean I was finally ready to accept that I was just as much at fault for the breakup? Maybe been even more unreasonable? It had been so much easier to lay all the blame at his feet, determined never to let those feelings for him surge to the surface again, yet here I was.

God, I could hardly stand myself.

Tossing my clothes onto a chair, I headed into the bathroom, turning the shower on full force, as hot as I could stand it. I stepped under the spray and poured a generous amount of shower gel into my hands, furiously working up a lather. I spread the thick

foam everywhere on my body and scrubbed as hard as I could, as if sheer force of will could wash away the scent of Dallas Creed on my body and the imprint of his fingers on my skin.

The feel of his cock buried deep inside me.

His mouth on me everywhere.

And that seductive voice murmuring in my ear, whispering erotic words. Melting my defenses until I had no will to resist.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

This was business. I kept telling myself that over and over. I could handle this job, handle being with him all the time.

But last night neither my body nor my heart had paid attention to that.

As I rubbed my skin until it turned red, tears burned my eyelids. Shame? Anger? I didn't know. Maybe I didn't want to know. The fact was, I'd broken the cardinal rule of the agency – don't sleep with the client, even if he is a former lover. And the worst part of it was, I was still in love with Dallas Creed. No doubt about it.

I squeezed my eyelids tightly shut, trying to hold back the dam, but it burst forth anyway, tears cascading down my cheeks and mingling with the rivulets of water from the shower. Leaning against the tiled wall, I gave in to the storm. I cried for the girl I'd been and the dreams I'd lost. I cried for the man I'd loved before and the changed one I loved now. We were both older and wiser with a lot of life behind us. And how sad I was at all the years we'd wasted. Could there be a chance for us to start over? I hated to admit to myself just how badly I wanted that. I cried until there was nothing left and I was weak from the emotional battering.

Finally I rinsed, turned off the shower and stepped out onto the mat. I still had a job to do and a client to protect. Responsibilities to attend to. Wrapping a towel around myself, I began the process of pulling my frayed edges together. It was obvious, however, I was going to have to make some adjustments. My ability to lead the team was clearly affected by the surge of emotions Dallas had roused in me. My first order of business would be to talk to Mike and to rely on his discretion. Probably not a problem. He'd been with me since I opened the doors to the agency so I trusted him completely.

I dressed in black slacks and a plain gray blouse. Tiny gold hoops at my ears. Gun at the small of my back again. Minimal makeup. I didn't have the discipline this morning to work my hair into its complicated braid so I pulled it into a ponytail. I took one last glance in the mirror, scrutinizing the solemn, colorless woman who stared back at me. No evidence of last night's earth-shattering sex. Okay. Good enough.

Shrugging into my jacket, I picked up my smartphone, took a deep breath, walked down the hallway and swiped the key card to the suite. Dallas was sitting on the couch in yesterday's jeans and shirt, the shirt unbuttoned and hanging open. For the briefest of moments my eyes flicked to the soft pelt of hair on his hard chest, remembering the feel of it against my breasts. Then I blinked and forced my gaze away.

"Morning." Dallas gave me a slow, sinful grin. "It wasn't much fun waking up to an empty bed this morning."

Now or never, Charley. Make up your mind. Maybe this all happened for a reason.

"Maybe you won't have to anymore," I said softly.

His eyes widened, hope flaring in them. "Are you —"

I held up my hand. "I need to make some adjustments to our arrangements," I told him. "And I will insist on the utmost discretion at all times."

His face hardened. "I'm not playing a game here. What we do is nobody's business but ours."

I nodded then bit my lip, feeling an unfamiliar uncertainty. "We'll take this one day at a time, okay?"

The smile was back. "However you want it, Charley."

"Give me a minute and we'll order breakfast."

I knocked gently on Mike's door, which was now closed. If he was asleep I'd catch him later, but he opened it immediately.

"Morning, boss."

Was that a knowing look in his eyes or was I just imagining things?

"I need to make some changes that I hope you're okay with."

"I'm good with whatever you need," he told me.

I blessed his solid, quiet strength, something I really needed right now. It took less than five minutes to brief him on what I wanted, leaving out any explanations, and he didn't ask for any. We would change shifts, with me taking over the nighttime, and Mike would accept more responsibility for keeping Dallas safe. That meant working with Chase to check every venue we played and all the hotels, vehicles and trailers in between. But when we finished I felt a lot better. I could try to pull my scattered emotions together and see exactly where Dallas and I were headed and Mike would make sure the man stayed alive.

"I'm going to order breakfast," I said when I re-entered the living room. "Mike told me what he wants. Let me find out if Morgan's up and wants to join us."

The answer was yes so I took their orders and called everything in. Turning away from the phone, I turned on my smartphone and called up the day's schedule.

"Todd should be here shortly," I commented. "We can review the details of what's going on today and plan the best way to get you from place to place. I don't want a repeat of yesterday's fiasco."

Dallas pushed himself up from the couch, slipped a hand under my chin and forced me to look at him. "I want you to know something. I have a lot to make up for and I damn sure intend to figure out how to do it. Don't try to run away from this, okay?"

I wet my lips. "Okay," I whispered, held in place by the force of his gaze.

He dropped his hand as a knock sounded on the door. My own hand was shaking as I opened it to admit Mike. Morgan appeared right behind him.

"Breakfast should be up in a moment," I told them.

"Dallas up?" Morgan asked.

I looked over my shoulder but Dallas had disappeared into his room. The door was closed.

"He was in here a minute ago. He probably went to shower." I made a show of checking notes on my smartphone. "Didn't Sawyer say he wanted a briefing this morning?"

"Briefing." Morgan made a rude noise. "You'd think he was the president. But yeah, he called me awhile ago. He should be showing up soon."

"Should I order something for him too?"

"Arsenic. Double shot."

I was startled by the venom in Morgan's voice. "You really don't like him, do you?"

"I think he's the king of sleaze and I'm still not convinced he didn't rip Dallas off after the accident. But I'm tolerating him for now because he put a killer tour together and all the dates are sold out. We'll see what happens afterward."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Is Dallas thinking of leaving him?"

Morgan shrugged. "Don't know. You know, Dallas didn't want the tours to begin with. He just wanted to record, maybe do a charity gig once in a while. Sawyer's the one who pushed for the concerts. But I keep a close eye on the money and I think after we wind up this particular set of dates, Dallas might be ready to just kick back and maybe enjoy life a little." He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Anyway, I doubt if Sawyer is interested in breaking bread with us. So just coffee for him."

I forced myself to sit quietly in one of the chairs, paging through documents in my smartphone and ignoring everyone else in the room. Still, I could feel Morgan studying me, feel his unspoken questions and his eyes boring into me as if they were twin lasers. I deliberately avoided talking to him, leaving him to chat with Mike until breakfast arrived.

During breakfast I focused the conversation on the day's schedule.

"Chase is going with the roadies to set up this morning," Mike told me. "I have two men sitting on the band, and they'll head to the sound check with them."

"Do you really think the band's in danger?" Morgan wanted to know.

"I have no idea yet who's behind all of this," I answered, "so I don't know if there's spillover to the others. Besides, I want to know where everyone is at all times and what they're doing."

"What about Todd Mullins?" Morgan asked.

"Todd's with the road crew," Mike said, and looked at his watch. "Didn't you tell me Sawyer Black wanted to see us this morning?"

As if on cue, a heavy knock sounded on the door. Morgan got up to answer it, admitting Sawyer. He wore another of his western-cut suits, gray with matching, hand-tooled boots, and a thundering scowl. He stormed into the room. "Will someone please tell me what the fuck is going on?"

"Nice to see you, too, Sawyer." Morgan's voice held an edge of sarcasm.

The manager turned his hard gaze toward me. "I thought you were supposed to be protecting my boy? For the fancy prices you charge, we should never have an incident like we had yesterday."

I had no idea who had told him about it. It certainly hadn't been either Dallas or Morgan. Obviously somewhere there was a leak in our communications hose. I just had to find it. Unless, of course, Sawyer had been the one plotting. I just couldn't make sense out of that though.

I didn't move from my chair, just returned his stare with one of my own. "Why don't you get a cup of coffee, Mr. Black?" I gestured to the service I'd had set up on the sideboard. "Then you can sit down and we'll brief you on everything."

He glared, started to say something then stomped to the coffee setup.

"All right," he said, pulling a straight chair up to the table. "I want some answers."

"Take a breath, Sawyer," Dallas said, leaning back in his chair. "Shit happens."

Black stirred sweetener into his coffee and focused his eyes on Dallas. "I'm very concerned about what happens to you."

I sipped my coffee and clicked on my personal radar. I didn't like the man just on general principle. There was something about him that rubbed me the wrong way. He was too sharp, too shiny and too arrogant for my taste. I'd worked with dozens of managers since opening the agency and most of them, while always sharp where their clients were concerned, were still basically nice people and not too bad to work with. Maybe it was just Sawyer's rough personality that rubbed me the wrong way but I'd be digging deeper into his life. Today I'd make sure I had a fully detailed report on the man, beginning when he'd "discovered" Dallas up to and including the accident three years ago and its aftermath.

Sawyer took a heavy swallow of his coffee, his gaze glued to my face. I couldn't help glancing at Morgan. I saw his face tighten but he kept his mouth shut, his lips pressed together in a thin line.

I'd done this more times than I could count, so I shifted into automatic pilot and spewed out the information in a concise format. Sawyer Black just kept sipping his coffee and watching me with unblinking eyes. When I had finished my recital, he placed his cup back in its saucer and nodded once.

"So what you're telling me is that despite your hefty fee, you still don't know who's behind this and there's been yet another attempt to kill Dallas. Have I got that right?"

The self-righteous look on his face really pissed me off. I waited for a two-second count to make sure I had my anger under control. "Yes, on the surface that's correct." I

should have shut up then but the man just pushed all my buttons. "But we've been on the job less than forty-eight hours. This has been going on for almost a month and I don't see that anyone else has made any headway. Including you."

I could feel both Dallas and Morgan looking at me, Morgan probably swallowing a smile, and Dallas... What? What was he thinking?

"Ms. Roper." Black's voice had an edge to it. "I understand you have a shitload of credentials, but my concern is for Dallas. If you can't handle the job—"

"I brought her in," Morgan interrupted. "I say she stays. You're not her client. I am. And Dallas. And we have full confidence in her. Dallas is safe and that's what counts."

"Is that a fact?"

"All right, that's enough." Dallas had barely moved but his voice was like a whip cutting through the air. "Back off, Sawyer. I understand that you're concerned and I appreciate it. We're not making any changes now, but you look out for my professional interests. Morgan's my brother and has a more personal interest in my safety. I approved the contract with Charley and it stands. Let's move on."

I folded my hands in my lap to keep from fidgeting and stared down at them. Time stretched out and it seemed a week before Mike, of all people, finally cleared his throat.

"Why don't we review those diagrams one more time and make sure we all know the danger points." He looked over at Sawyer. "Maybe you can spot some things at the arena we haven't thought about."

I was grateful to Mike for easing the tension. We got through the rest of the meeting without killing each other, everyone making notes except Sawyer, who never took his gaze from me. Yes, I'd definitely be taking a harder look into his background.

As soon as he left the room I reviewed the details of the trip to the arena late that afternoon one more time with Mike. And just to make myself feel better, we changed them slightly from the information we'd given Sawyer. At the moment, the only people I trusted were the Creed brothers, myself and my staff.

"All right then." I clicked off my smartphone. "I think we've got things as much under control as we can for the moment."

I pushed back my chair and stood up.

"Charley, how about giving me fifteen minutes of your time?" Dallas tilted his head back to look up at me.

The words were so soft I barely heard them. But I knew Morgan did by the change in his posture. I knew Dallas and I had to talk but not when we were the focus of everyone's attention. And I had no idea what I was going to say to him. Mostly because my feelings were all over the place and I need to pull them into some kind of cohesive form.

"Maybe this afternoon before we leave."

He studied my face carefully then nodded. "Make it work."

I practically ran from the room and shut myself in my bedroom. I was right to take a step back here. I was that quickly too emotionally involved. If something happened to Dallas Creed because I wasn't paying attention I'd never forgive myself.

Okay, Charley, breathe. Focus. You can do this.

My phone buzzed, signaling a text message from Jacquie.

Detailed reports on Sawyer Black and Todd Mullins emailed to you. Others to follow shortly.

I booted up my netbook, opened my email and downloaded the attachment. Wishing I'd brought a fresh cup of coffee with me but settling for water from the minibar instead, I sat down at the table and began to read what my staff had found.

Sawyer Black, 53

Born in Willcox, Arizona. Parents were itinerant pickers in agricultural center Sulphur Springs Valley. Little formal education as parents followed the "pickers trail" but very street smart. At some point ended up in Nashville working for a messenger service. Parlayed his contacts from that to get himself a manager's license from the American Federation of Musicians and managed some third-rate bar bands. Note – word has it he literally tripped over Dallas Creed in a ratty honky-tonk when he was out trolling for women one night. (From Jacquie – tells you what kind of women he goes for.) The rest is from his official bio – paid for demo tape out of his own pocket after first getting Dallas to sign a contract with him. Between Dallas' talent and Black's aggressive tactics, the climb to the top was straight and lined with gold. No wants or warrants, no ex-wives, no children that anyone knows about.

Then an addition from Dick Wiley, my chief in-house investigator.

Charley,

While everyone I talked to acknowledges Sawyer Black's golden touch with Dallas, no one likes him and many question his methods. I touched base with some of our other clients in the industry and at least three of them said they'd go back to playing bars before letting Black get his hooks into him. But they did agree, grudgingly, he'd done an incredible job with Dallas. I can't find any reason why he'd want to kill his money supply but if I were you, I'd watch my back. He isn't too kind to anyone he thinks is pushing him aside.

So. Obvious reason for bad blood between Black and Morgan and for his resentment of me. I wondered just how much he knew about my past with Dallas. I couldn't imagine it being a topic of discussion, not when it had been a dead issue by the time Black came along. But it was yet another reason for me to make sure what had happened last night with Dallas was a one-time thing.

I pulled up the next report.

Todd Mullins, 48, road manager

Born Little Rock, Arkansas. No wants or warrants. Married but separated for fifteen years. Jo Ellen Mullins now living in Benton Springs, Texas. One child. Mullins is a high-school graduate. Began working the bars in Austin, helping bands when they came in to play. Got hired on with one when one of their roadies quit. Worked his way up the food chain from there.

Note from Dick Wiley.

Rumor on the street has it that Todd and Sawyer hooked up in Detroit when Todd broke up a fight between Sawyer's "client" and the band Mullins was working for. Some say it's a marriage made in heaven. Mullins has a rep for running a real tight ship with his crew and making sure every show goes off without a hitch. Black is known for squeezing every dime and every bit of publicity out of Creed's recordings and appearances. Our last client told me they actually don't even like each other but work so well together they can't get a divorce. Mullins is considered one of the highest-paid road managers in the industry.

I leaned back in the chair and rubbed my eyes. Nothing there either. Who wants to cut off the money stream? But that made me think of something else, something I should have jumped on before. First I called my office and told Jacquie what I wanted.

"And of course, you want it yesterday," she teased.

Normally Jacquie's unfailing good humor no matter what the crisis could lighten my mood. Not today. Not when I was so filled with unfamiliar conflict.

"Just get it to me by tomorrow at the latest," I told her.

"Okay, Charley." I could hear the sobering tone of her voice. "Everything okay? Problems you need to tell me about? Team not working out well?"

I huffed out a sigh. "Everything's fine. Truly. Just a little tense until we can peg who's behind all this. So get me that info right away, okay?"

"I'll get on it as soon as we hang up." She paused. "And call me if you need to."

"Thanks." I disconnected the call. After Dallas and I had split, I avoided relationships of any kind except the most casual. It kept me from getting hurt but it also isolated me. Jacquie was the closest thing to a friend I had. And wasn't that a sorry state of affairs.

Okay. I had something important to take care of with Morgan but I didn't see how I could get him alone, away from Dallas. The question was, would Dallas object to what I wanted or just let Morgan handle everything as he was already doing? I fiddled with my BlackBerry, wondering if I should call Morgan or just get my act together and go back to the suite, hoping that no one would have any objections.

Wetting my lips and wiping my hands on my jacket, I unlocked the suite door. Everyone was where I had left them, after a fashion. Morgan was at the table drinking coffee, Dallas was on the couch leaning back, eyes closed, but they opened the moment

he heard the door. Mike was sitting in one of the chairs, leafing through a magazine, eyes watchful.

"Gentlemen."

I nodded in everyone's directions, got myself a cup of coffee and joined Morgan at the table. Why on earth was I so nervous? I was just conducting business, and making a not-unusual request. But every inch of skin on my body was acutely aware of Dallas Creed's long length stretched out on the couch.

"You're the client," I said, looking at Morgan, "so I'll address this directly to you."

"If it concerns me I need to know about it." Dallas had closed his eyes again but I knew he was alert to everything going on.

"Fine. Whatever." I sipped my coffee then set the cup down very precisely. "I've been reading the reports on Sawyer Black and Todd Mullins. It's obvious their relationship with Dallas has paid them very well."

"That's no secret," Dallas offered laconically.

Morgan made a sound of disgust. "No offense, Charley, but it doesn't take a genius to figure that out."

I nodded. "I'm not offended. I'm worried."

Morgan's eyebrows rose. "Worried? Do you know something I don't?"

"Worried about what?" Dallas asked at the same time. "Morgan's keeping an eye on everything. He told you that."

I nodded. "I know that. But I have a lot of unanswered questions. I asked you this before, Morgan, but now I think it's really important. When everything fell apart before, I know Sawyer told you all the money was gone. That Sawyer gave you some kind of summary. Do you still have that information?"

"He said what he gave me was a final statement," Morgan answered. "An overview."

"I think you're chasing ghosts if you think there's something there, Charley," Dallas said, still not moving from the couch. "I blew it, plain and simple."

I could feel the tension radiating from him. I was crossing into territory he'd made very plain he didn't want to discuss.

"I might just as well have put it in a big pile and set fire to it," he went on. "I can promise you there's nothing there. Can we please leave that part of my life dead and buried?"

"I'm sorry, but I need to get some answers here. There are some things I'm curious about and that seems a good place to start."

Morgan spread out his hands, palms up. "Look at it from my point of view. Dallas and I had barely exchanged two words since he took off on the glory trail. When it all went to shit, he had no one but me. At first I thought about walking away, but he's my brother, for god's sake. So then my priority was all about making sure he didn't die and then about putting him back together."

"But —"

He held up a hand. "I hadn't a clue how anything in this business worked. And Dallas had been with Sawyer for more than seventeen years by that time, so why would I doubt him when he said it was all gone? Christ, I only had to read the papers or watch television to see what his lifestyle was like."

"So the answer to digging deeper would be no?"

"Charley, listen. I —"

"That's right," Dallas put in. "The answer is no." He sat up, swinging his legs to the floor and pushing himself to his feet. When he took a seat at the table I felt the heat radiating from him, along with his anger.

"It's okay. I just needed to know what had or had not been done." I blew out a breath. "Here's the thing, and I really want you to agree to this, Dallas. I want to get a forensic accountant in to go over all the books."

"Why?" Dallas asked. "You can't think Morgan's doing anything wrong. My brother's not the one trying to kill me."

I put my hand on his arm to ease him. Big mistake. Electricity sizzled between us in an almost visible charge. "Of course not. I don't know if *anyone's* doing anything wrong. But the first rule in any case is 'follow the money trail'. See where it leads. That means checking all the accounts, seeing who gets paid what and what they do with the money."

"Why dig into the old records? What's done is done. If Sawyer and Todd are getting their pockets filled because of me they sure aren't the ones trying to get rid of me. Not when the money just keeps piling up for them."

I got up to refill my coffee cup. Instead of sitting down at the table again I leaned against the sideboard. "I agree. And I'm not pointing a finger at anyone yet. I don't know enough to do that. But there could be some kind of pattern from those years that's carried over that might give me some kind of clue. I can't afford to overlook anything. I promise you, Dallas, all I care about during those years is what money came in and what went out."

He frowned. "Exactly what does this mean? And pardon my stupidity, but what the hell is a forensic accountant? And why do we need one?"

I cleared my throat. "No stupidity here," I told him. "Most people don't understand it at all. It's someone who combines accounting, auditing and investigative skills. They can look at a money trail and follow it places where most accountants wouldn't even think of going. And they can spot things that on the surface look okay but really aren't." I forced myself to look directly at him. "There could be something there that leads us to whoever is behind all this."

"Do it." I wasn't surprised at Morgan's instant agreement. "I think it's way overdue anyway. Just because I'm riding herd on the money doesn't mean something isn't slipping by me." He frowned. "But again, if these guys are getting so fat off Dallas, they wouldn't be interested in killing him. It wouldn't make sense."

"I agree. But by following the money trail we can see who else might be involved who holds a grudge of some kind. Someone who feels he—or she—got cheated along the way. You have no idea where financial tentacles can take you."

Morgan leaned back in his chair. "So what do you need from me?"

"Copies of whatever Sawyer gave you three years ago and permission to access the current accounts. Whichever one of you needs to sign the agreement giving me the authority to bring someone in."

"We'll both sign," Dallas said abruptly. "That way there won't be any question. But be prepared." His silver gray eyes bored into me. "I don't want a pissing contest with Sawyer in the middle of a tour."

"I'm sure from what he indicated he wants me to try everything to find answers here," I shot back.

I turned back to Morgan. "Okay then. I'm going to print out something for you both to sign. That will give us license to go hunting everywhere, including the accounts with the promotional company and the distributors."

"Tread lightly, Charley," Morgan said. "We do business with these people."

"I'll be using someone who's very experienced at this. Please trust me. I know what I'm doing."

"Go ahead and get what you need."

It only took me a minute to find the document I wanted and print it out. I had Morgan and Dallas sign two copies, just in case. I'd fax a copy to Jacquie and then courier the original to her. The other I'd keep with me.

Dallas dropped the pen he was using, unfolded himself from the chair and pushed it into the table. "I think I need some down time."

He disappeared into his room and closed the door.

I looked at Morgan. "Down time?"

"Yes. He always does that the day of a performance. Gets into himself, so to speak. Finds his center so he can go out on the stage and be Dallas Creed."

"I know. I've guarded other musicians."

He smiled. "It's a lot better than the booze he used to do it with."

"You and Dallas are pretty tight now, aren't you?"

Morgan stared at a spot over my shoulder, eyes unfocused. "Yeah, we are. I never thought it would happen after...well, you know."

I knew maybe even more than he did. Or maybe not. The brothers had been very close, with big plans for the ranch, until Dallas bolted.

"Do you ever talk about those years?"

He shrugged. "We did when he was first healing, but not a lot. I decided it was best to let the past scab over and go on from there."

"But didn't you feel hurt?" I persisted. "Betrayed?" Had he felt like I did? Kicked to the curb? How had he gotten past it?

His mouth curled in a half smile. "Who exactly are we talking about here, Charley? Me or you?"

I pushed back my chair and stood up. "Neither. We're talking about checking the books."

I started toward my room but Morgan reached out a hand and stopped me.

"Something happened between you two. Twenty years ago and now. I don't know what it is and I'm not even sure I want to know."

"We're fine, Morgan. Let it go." I wondered if he could hear the butterflies tap dancing in my stomach.

When he stood up he towered over me and I had to crane my neck to look up at him. "Take it easy on him, okay? You have no idea the hell he went through."

And that was what was pushing me toward him. The fact that he was starting his life over again and wanted me in it. He *was* different. I just had to make sure I could trust the new Dallas.

"No problem."

I picked up the sheets of paper and went into my room.

Chapter Nine

The man called Heartless sat in his room dressed only in jeans. He had places to go and things to do, but first he needed to make plans. If he kept screwing things up, he might just as well shoot himself as try for Dallas Creed.

How did things get so fucked up, anyway? The plan had seemed so simple. Stake out the target, do the deed. Yet things kept going wrong. Falling to shit.

He smoothed his hands over the barrel of his rifle. An old friend that had served him well. But maybe he needed to forget about taking the shot and go back to the original plan. That hadn't worked too well, but he knew the pitfalls and he could plan better.

Time was running out. He had almost everything he needed by now. Almost but not quite. All the planning and preparing were almost ready to pay off. Until everything started to go wrong. He wanted to bang his head against the table in frustration.

It pissed him off that hotshot Charley Roper had been brought in. But he was smart. He could work around her, no problem. No matter what people said about her abilities, she was just another bitch on wheels who had big ideas about herself.

Heartless curved his lips into a cold smile. Maybe he'd take her out for good measure. The bodyguard. Yeah. Collateral damage. Okay. He just needed a new plan.

* * * * *

"Where's Charley?"

Dallas opened the door from his room into the living room and looked around. He wanted to talk to Charley who seemed to have made herself scarce. Exactly what Dallas had feared all along had happened. He'd been afraid if he saw her again he'd realize how much he still loved her and she'd still be hiding behind a wall of bitterness. One she might never climb over.

But last night had been magic. Pure magic. The kind they'd had before he'd been such a dumb shit. And he wasn't about to let her wipe it away. She'd said they could talk before leaving for the sound check so where was she?

His brother took a seat on the couch, picking up the newspaper he'd brought with him earlier. "She's got work to do, bro."

"I thought I was her work?" Christ, did he have to sound like such a petulant kid?

But his brother just smiled at him. "Feeling a little ignored, are we?" Then he sobered. "Charley has a business to run as well as taking care of all the security details for your tour and trying to find out who's behind all this."

"Yeah, you're right. I guess."

"Anything I can get for you?" Mike was stretched out in one of the big armchairs, idly flipping through channels on the television.

"No, thanks anyway." *What I want you haven't got.* "I think I'll lie down for a little while."

Morgan raised an eyebrow. "You just got up." One corner of his mouth tilted up. "Problem sleeping last night?"

"No," he snapped. "I just want to get as much rest as I can before tonight." He headed toward the bedroom. "Let me know if she decides to order lunch for everyone."

Secure in the privacy of his room, he flopped down on the bed and closed his eyes. What a mess. What a fucking mess. He should have put a stop to this before it even got started.

But alone with her, close to her, it was impossible to deny the feelings that still pulled them together. Close to her, he hadn't been able to stop himself from touching her. Tasting her, letting her fill all his senses.

Just touching her was like bathing in an aphrodisiac. Wanting her was a sharp pain. Needing her was...more than he wanted to admit to himself. What a stupid ass he'd been all those years ago to handle things the way he had. But at twenty-three he'd had little maturity and less common sense.

Last night was a start. This time I'm not going to screw it up. Sure, maybe she could have cut me some slack twenty years ago. Given me a chance to really talk to her. But you can only beat a dead horse for so long.

He'd lost count of the nights he'd sat up on the tiny stage in one smoky bar after another, looking out into the darkness filled with whispering voices and the clink of glasses and beer bottles, expecting—no, hoping—that any minute he'd see her come through the door.

He'd even had it all planned out in his mind. She'd walk in, with that little hip wiggle he loved, sit down near the stage and give him that smile that made his cock sit up and take notice. He'd smile back at her and let his eyes drink her in. The argument, the fighting would all be forgotten. He'd be sorry, she'd be sorry. She'd order a drink and lean back in her chair the way she always did when she came to hear him sing.

He'd written a song just for her, *Love is the Word*, but to this day he'd never performed it. How could he, when she wasn't there to hear it?

But she hadn't walked in, not to any of the places where he and the band had scraped gigs together. Sometimes he'd felt so isolated he wondered if it was worth it. Even his relationship with Morgan had broken, fractured the day he walked away from the ranch.

So many other dreams shattered so he could pursue his own. He had no idea how things would have played out if Sawyer Black hadn't walked into that honky-tonk on that particular night and, for whatever reason, been taken with his voice and his music.

Sawyer was a shark, always going for the jugular, but that's what it took to make it in this business. Any business, for that matter. Dallas had lost count of the bodies he'd stepped over climbing that ladder, but the first night they'd opened for a major star in a fifteen-thousand-seat arena, his blood had been pumping so hard he'd been afraid he was having a heart attack.

And then he'd been sucked into the vortex of success, burying the memory of Charley beneath a blanket of booze and drugs and handy women. Oh yeah, the women. He prayed Charley wouldn't dig up a couple of the messes Sawyer had gotten him out of. When he thought of it all now he shuddered, wondering how he'd even been able to stand himself. Glad now that Charley hadn't seen him at what was both his best and his worst.

The accident had shaken up his brain as much as his body. The glory didn't just fade, it disappeared into a black void. Somehow he'd pissed away an unholy amount of money and left himself broken and bankrupt. He'd nearly wept when Morgan showed up at the hospital and said he was taking him back to the ranch. As he slowly rebuilt his body, he'd been able to do the same thing with his relationship with his brother.

He hadn't wanted to tour again, just record and do a special appearance now and then. Make enough money to help with the ranch. But that damn Sawyer with his silver tongue had slicked him right into it. Only this time he had Morgan watching his back and nothing was going to change that.

It had given him hope that eventually he could put back together the pieces of his relationship with Charley. Morgan's idea to hire her had been a stroke of genius, but he had to get through his own defenses to find his way through hers. He hadn't expected an easy ride and his first reaction was to hurt her before she could do the same to him.

But how could he block what he was feeling?

Last night had been a miracle, as far as he was concerned. He'd done his best to show her how he felt, how much he cared. How much he'd changed. He knew he probably had some groveling to do, but first he wanted the connection.

Waking up alone this morning had been both shocking and disappointing. He'd really expected to wake up with her in his arms, maybe cuddle a bit before some slow, early-morning loving. The empty bed had hit him like ice water. Shit. She could try to pretend nothing had changed but she knew as well as he did that was a damn lie.

Dallas raked his hands through his hair. He had to figure out how to do this, and do it right. Certainly before someone killed him.

And what the hell was that all about, anyway? He'd have thought it more likely something like this would happen when he was high and drunk and kicking people to the curb. Not now, when he was trying to be Mr. Clean and rebuild his life. The right way.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts.

"Yeah? What is it?"

"It's Mike," the voice called. "Can you open the door for a minute?"

Dallas yanked it open. "What?" Then he blew out a breath. No sense taking out his frustration on a man who was just doing his job. "Sorry. What's up?"

"Just thought I'd give you a little notice. We'll be leaving for the arena about a quarter to four. Let me know when you want lunch and I'll get it sent up."

"Okay." He wasn't hungry but he knew he had to put something in his stomach.

Mike gave him an assessing look. "You okay? You need something?"

"No. Thanks." He peered over the man's shoulder. "Where's Charley?"

"Taking care of some business. If you need anything just yell for me. And be sure to keep the chain and deadbolt on the door to the hallway."

"Got it."

Irritated, he took his guitar out of its case and stretched out on the bed, resting it against his thighs. Without even realizing it, he began picking out the notes to *Love is the Word*.

* * * * *

It had taken the better part of two hours to track down the forensic accountant I wanted, get hold of her and offer her an obscene amount of money to drop whatever she was doing. When I called the office for phone numbers, Jacquie had offered to take care of whatever calls I needed to make but I wanted to do this myself. I had specific instructions and didn't want to involve anyone else.

When I printed out the agreement for Morgan to sign, he'd done so without hesitation.

"Just make sure I get a copy of everything that comes through," he told me.

"You'll get copies of all the reports," I assured him.

"No, not reports. Everything you get as soon as you get it. That's the deal, Charley."

I frowned. "You expecting to find something I won't?"

He shook his head. "I don't know what we'll find. I just have this itch that somewhere in the money trail we'll find a clue as to what the hell this is all about. I thought I'd taken all the business precautions I needed to, but if Dallas is getting screwed right under my nose, I intend to put a stop to it immediately."

"All right. If that's what you want."

Finding the right person for the job was important. I had used Lynette Touhey a number of times. At a petite five foot three with masses of auburn curls and a pixie smile, she looked about as far from a forensic accountant as you could get. But her mind was razor sharp and she knew more places to hide money than my great-grandmother.

I was prepared to go to the next two names on my list if I had to but I managed to twist Lynette's arm.

"It'll be my pleasure to charge you through the nose," she laughed when I finally convinced her to put aside what she was working on. "You're just lucky this particular job doesn't have 'rush' pasted all over it."

"Well, this one does," I told her. "I'm sending you a letter of agreement on your secure fax line along with a copy of Morgan's letter authorizing this and a list of what I want checked. I'll call the office and have Jacquie cut you a retainer check."

I faxed the documents to Lynette and called Jacquie to tell her what I needed her to do. Fifteen minutes after I hung up, my cell rang.

"You don't want much, do you?" Lynette was all business now.

"I want it all," I agreed. "Every last nickel, dime, transfer, exchange, whatever. If any of the promoters or suppliers give you a hard time about providing the information you need, let me know. I'll take care of it."

"You planning to strong arm them, Miz Smith?" The reference to Jaclyn Smith, star of the old *Charlie's Angels* television show, was a standing joke between us.

"If I have to," I told her. "But usually I'm most effective in the threat department."

"Allrighty then. I'll get started on this right away. Probably with the accountant Morgan uses and go from there."

"Just be aware that's probably not the place you'll find anything."

"I know, but it will give me a jumping-off point."

"How soon can you get me something?"

Lynette's laugh bubbled through the connection. "You want it yesterday, right? I'll do my best."

I lowered my voice, even though there was no one in the room with me. "This could help me find who's out to kill Dallas, Lynette. I need the info."

"Got it." Her voice sobered. "I'm on it right now."

I ate lunch by myself while I caught up with the other contracts we had going and double-checked with Chase that the band was under good supervision. Sawyer Black called to tell me he didn't need any damn babysitter following him around. I wasn't in the mood for his heavy-handed attitude or this pissing contest he was in with Morgan so I told him too damn bad until this was over. He could accept it or go home. When he disconnected the call, he snapped his cell phone shut so hard it almost made my ear ache.

I still hadn't figured out if the man was just a natural asshole or he really had something to hide. And I needed to remember that whatever he might be hiding could have nothing to do with Dallas and what was happening now. That Dallas was his meal ticket and he was protecting him in his own way.

I hadn't forgotten that Dallas wanted to talk to me before we left for the sound check but I was still too shaky in my own mind—and heart—to have the conversation

he wanted right now. It was still too painful taking an honest look at my own role in our breakup so I made myself scarce until it was time to leave. When I arrived back at the suite I could tell he was seething, giving me a curt nod to acknowledge my presence. Pissed that I'd avoided our conversation. Tonight, after the show, I told myself. When he wasn't so tense.

Mike handed me a small cooler. "As requested."

"Thanks." I looked at Dallas. "Your orange juice."

He frowned. "Todd always makes sure I have plenty."

"I'm sure he does but from now on you only eat or drink what I personally supervise."

He stared at me. "You think someone's going to poison me?"

"Not necessarily. But I don't want any peanut extract sneaking into anything either. I'm just making sure it's not an option for our killer." I had already made everyone on the team aware of Dallas' peanut allergy and that it could be fatal. This was just another safeguard.

Mike and I had worked out a convoluted caravan to the arena. This time we took Dallas down to the receiving dock and out to where Mike and another agent had parked two SUVs between the massive trucks making deliveries. I had insisted Dallas not wear his trademark Stetson, and that he let me carry his guitar. He handed it over to me as if it was a newborn.

"I'll take very good care of it," I promised him. "You can trust me."

For a moment I thought he was either going to argue with me or kiss me, either of which would have been a problem. But then he turned abruptly and walked out onto the loading dock with Mike. I waited until they climbed into the waiting vehicle and backed out of the loading area before making myself visible. The two agents with me flanked me as we walked down the concrete steps and over to the other SUV. One of the agents carried the guitar case and slid it into a waiting packing crate in the rear of the vehicle.

Mike and I took different routes to the venue, always in constant radio contact. He took a longer route to allow me to arrive first. Chase was waiting for us at the rear of the arena, holding the door open to let me in along with Morgan who'd ridden with me. Then came my men with the packing crate.

"Take it up onto the stage," I directed, "and be very, very careful with it."

"What's that?" Todd Mullins was standing on the proscenium with a clipboard in his hand, watching us.

"Dallas' guitar. Could you please take it out of there and set it up for him?"

He looked at me as if I'd just lost my last brain. "Why doesn't he have it with him? He'll kill all of us if anything happens to his baby."

"Just set it up, okay?"

He had just removed it from its case and set it on a stand on the stage when the door opened again to admit Dallas, Mike and the agent who had driven them. Mike nodded to let me know there hadn't been any incidents. Dallas headed straight for the stage to get his guitar. I saw Todd approach him and engage him in whispered conversation. Twice the road manager looked over at me and both times Dallas shook his head. Finally Todd threw up a hand in disgust and headed out to the middle of the huge seating area where the soundboard had been set up.

"Ten minutes," he called to Dallas.

This arena, like the one the other night, was open air with much of it under roof. The overflow bought lawn tickets. The problem with a setup like this was the lack of permanent dressing rooms, hence the rented trailer. Chase jogged down the narrow steps from the stage to bring me up to date on the setup.

"We checked out all the trailers as soon as we got here, Charley. I left two guys with the band and Harry and I did the trailer thing."

"How secure are we?" I asked. "I don't want a repeat of what happened the other night."

"We got here just as they were being delivered. I've got Dallas sandwiched between the two the band and roadies use. No one outside the perimeter can get a clear shot." He handed me the diagram he'd drawn. "I'll give a copy of this to Mike too. That way when it's time to leave we can pull the truck right up to the trailer entrance and hustle him into it."

I studied the drawing of the trailers and the area around them. "What about the press? Dallas always gives interviews just before the show. I nixed the one Sawyer wanted to hold at the hotel and he's seeing red, so we have to throw him a bone of some kind."

"We can do it." Chase pointed to a place he'd marked on the diagram. "I told the guy with Sawyer Black to set it up for six o'clock. We can do it right here in the arena and keep him surrounded, then hustle him back to the trailer."

I huffed a sigh. "All right. You guys know the drill. And Mike stays glued to Dallas' side every second."

Chase handed me a key. "For the trailer. Per Jacquie, I had them locked up. I've got the extra key for the big man's so we can let the caterers in and Todd Mullins has the ones for the band and the road crew."

I'd had Jacquie work with the promoter on the trailer rental so we could vet them, and the caterer was one I knew and trusted. Part of every performer's contract included specs for the food he requested in his dressing room and I reminded her that all the food orders had to have *No Peanuts* in bold red letters. Morgan had told me Dallas did not allow any alcohol in his dressing room any more, only soft drinks, and the platters set out for him were fruit, crackers and cheese. The image of Dallas Creed as a health nut made me smile to myself.

"Oh, and one more thing. I waited in there while the wardrobe guy brought in Dallas' stage clothes and stuff for him to change into and watched him every minute. Even made him shake out the boots. Nothing off-kilter there. Checked everything myself."

"Good thinking. Okay." I motioned to Mike. "Let's do our walk-through before they get going here."

I asked Mike to point out Randy Mueller to me. He was on the far side of the stage, stretching a cable. His long brown hair fell forward, shielding his face, but every line of his body screamed rage. I'd seen it too many times before not to recognize it. When he lifted his head and shook his hair back, staring across the stage to Dallas, even at this distance I could see the hatred blazing there. If Dallas thought taking care of Randy was softening the painful results of the crash he had another think coming.

"I don't like the looks of him," I told Morgan. "Has he caused trouble before now?"

"Just the usual trash talk about how Dallas ruined his life but he's been doing it for so long no one pays much attention to it anymore. I know you have to check him out but I think Randy enjoys hating Dallas too much to do away with him. Who would he have to badmouth then?"

"Still, I can't afford to take chances." I nudged Chase. "I want you to keep a particular eye on that guy. He's carrying a heavy grudge and has all the access necessary to get to Dallas."

"But wasn't he with the rest of the crew when the shot was taken on the interstate yesterday?"

I nodded. "He could have help though. I'm texting Jacquie to check on his friends and family and anyone else in his circle who hates Dallas as much as he does."

"Consider it done. Give me just a minute here." He stepped over to one of his men watching the setup, spoke to him in a low voice, then rejoined me. "All set."

I sent the message to my office then the four of us walked every inch of the backstage area, marking notes where there might be trouble spots on the diagrams Chase handed out. I'd meet with the head of the arena security an hour before the concert to tell him where some of his men should be assigned. My team would take the most critical areas, including the open rear of the venue.

Finally I nodded toward the stage. "I think they're getting ready to start. I'll get out of the way."

I left Mike standing in the wings with his hand resting on his gun and took a seat halfway to the back.

Having provided security for a number of musicians, sitting through a sound check was no novelty for me. I was used to the cat's cradle of cables snaking across the stage, the roadies on high ladders shouting to each other as they angled lights and overhead speakers, the sudden squealing sounds of feedback as speakers and amps were adjusted. But this was the first Dallas Creed sound check.

The concert two nights ago had been incredible, but this was the performance stripped down to its basic elements. The place where they worked to get it right so, to the audience, it looked easy and effortless. No frills at sound checks. It was all stopping and starting as volume was adjusted and instruments balanced. And the sound of the man's voice early in the day before it was completely warmed up.

I watched while all the musicians, Dallas included, plugged in earpieces that were attached to receivers at the small of the back. Todd Mullins was standing in front of the stage. Dallas walked over, bent down to talk to him and it looked like the conversation didn't have any happy vibes to it. Finally Todd threw up his hands and walked back to the soundboards.

"We'll just run through it once," Dallas said into the microphone.

"You've had trouble with it at every performance," Todd shouted back. "But okay. It's your funeral."

The band kicked into the intro of the song they'd had a problem with in the studio and I settled deeper into my seat.

On the massive boards the engineers used, there was one sound mix for the audio that the audience heard, and another for the musicians so they could hear themselves. I glanced back at the soundboards where Todd now stood with the two engineers and noticed he was now wearing headphones and a lip mic. He spoke into it, pointed to the stage, and the two rhythm guitars hit a hot downstroke.

Even without the stage lighting and special effects, there was a certain electricity about Dallas Creed the moment he took center stage. Again I had the feeling of being back in time in an Austin bar, with Dallas and the band squeezed onto a tiny stage and the crowd clapping as if they were listening to Toby Keith. Once again I had to face the hard fact that the blame for our breakup was equally mine. Where had my faith in Dallas been all those years ago? Could we really forget all the pain and go forward from here?

"*Buy Me a Drink* is one of his earliest songs."

I heard Morgan's voice at my left. I'd seen him approach the row where I was sitting out of the corner of my eye. Now he dropped into the seat next to me and draped his long legs over the back of the row in front of us.

"And he still performs it? After twenty years?"

"It's a crowd-pleaser. Fast, up-tempo. Got humorous lyrics. Everyone knows it. And the arrangement gives the band a chance to work the kinks out of each of the instruments."

He was right. Everyone had a solo lick in the song, even the drummer. And it was a catchy melody. Without even realizing it, I found myself tapping my foot and shifting my body to the beat. Dallas' voice still had the afternoon raw sound, as if he'd scraped his vocal cords, but as he sang his throat warmed up and the husky, honeyed tones that were his signature floated out into the audience area.

It was a good thing they stopped and started a number of times as the sound was adjusted or I might have forgotten I was supposed to be working, not chilling out. A major sin on my part. But Dallas Creed's whiskey-rough voice had always mesmerized me and apparently the years hadn't lessened its impact. If anything, his voice was deeper, richer, more seductive as it flowed like liquid gold out into the empty arena.

When the band switched to a ballad, I looked up and it felt as if Dallas was looking directly at me. Idiotic, of course. He was focused on getting the sound right, the mix just so, the blend of voices and instruments where he wanted it. Every so often he'd signal to Todd and the sound engineers would make some kind of adjustment. But then I could swear his gaze traveled back to me.

I pushed myself out of the seat and climbed over Morgan. "I think I'll go check on the food. I've got dinner coming, then the snack trays for after the show."

Morgan grabbed my hand as I stepped into the aisle.

"He's had a rough three years, Charley. He's still not over it. And this threat...whatever it is...isn't helping."

I squeezed his hand with what I hoped was reassurance. "We'll get it done, Morgan. Don't worry. And we'll take good care of Dallas."

I made my way to the rear door where Chase was standing.

"You need anything?" he asked.

"No. Just going to the trailer to wait for the food. Make sure Mike gets Dallas over there as soon as they're through here. And I want eyes on Randy Mueller at all times."

"You got it. See you later."

I checked the area as I walked through the grass to the middle trailer but didn't see anything that set off red flags. The parking crew was arriving, donning their orange vests and setting up cones to direct the flow of traffic, but that was all.

Having Lynette Touhey on the money trail gave me a small measure of satisfaction. She was an accounting shark who would trace every payroll check, every vendor payment, every check ever written to its ultimate conclusion. If someone had a secret they were using money to hide, Lynette would uncover it. I'd never figured out how she got access to accounts that normally needed warrants but I always thought the "Don't ask, don't tell" worked for us until we got to a tipping point.

I let myself into the cool air of the trailer and scanned the interior. It was nearly a carbon copy of the one I'd been in just two nights ago. Two nights? Was that all it had been? I shook my head. I felt as if I'd lived a lifetime in that short period. I wandered through the trailer, taking in the living room, the bedroom, the fully outfitted bath. It was pretty luxurious as trailers went, but then Dallas was the big star and could certainly afford it. His stage clothes were hanging in the bedroom closet, studded jeans and short denim jacket with a plaid shirt. Just the right amount of country, not too much flash. And beneath them the requisite custom-made boots, hand-tooled with an intricate design.

Idle curiosity prompted me to open the drawers in the small dresser. Most of them were empty, but the top one held shorts, a t-shirt and clean boxers. Stuff for Dallas to change into after the performance.

As I turned to go into the living room the walkie-talkie I was holding squawked at me. I pressed the talk key. "Go ahead."

"Charley, this is Mike. You'd best get back up here right now. We barely averted a disaster."

Chapter Ten

I made sure to secure the lock on the trailer before I raced across the grass and parking lot to the arena. Chase was waiting for me by the rear door.

"What?" I stopped in front of him, pulling in breath.

"Come on in and see for yourself. It's a mess."

Inside I jogged up the steps to the stage. Everyone—security, musicians, roadies, Morgan, Dallas—was standing in a tight group. Mike was shouting at Randy who was shouting back at anyone who would listen. Dallas was chugging his orange juice, seemingly calm but I could see the veins bulging on his neck.

"Mike?" I nudged him. "What's going on here?"

Mike pointed to a massive steel brace lying on the floor with several light cones and metal cups attached to it, many of them shattered. "We were getting ready to test the special pyrotechnics like we talked about. See if we needed to cancel them."

My heart was racing. "What happened?"

"Chase sent one of our guys who knows electrical stuff up to double-check it. Just to be sure everything was set up properly."

"And?" I prompted.

"First of all, the cups with the flash fire were upside down with covers that would open the moment the bar was even jiggled. But more than that, the metal truss was so unstable the moment we touched it, it broke free and fell to the stage."

I looked around, forcing myself to stay calm.

"Who rigged this?" I wanted to know.

Everyone looked at Randy. He shoved his long hair back from his face and glared at everyone. Hostility rolled off him in waves.

"When I finished my part of the setup it was perfect," he growled. "You aren't gonna lay this shit off on me."

"You were the lead roadie on it." Chase held up a sheet of paper. "I had Todd write down who did what so I could follow the setup."

"Anyone could have jimmied it," Randy snapped back. "Almost everyone was up on that catwalk at one time or another."

"But you were the one responsible."

"Okay, okay," Todd broke in, his voice edgy as usual. "Randy's right. It gets fuckin' busy up there, people up and down the ladder, on the catwalk. It doesn't take long for someone to screw things up. Anyone could have done this."

Everyone was shouting at each other again, Dallas also jumping to Randy's defense. I looked at Mike who put two fingers in his mouth and split the air with a shrill whistle. Everyone froze.

"All of you just shut up," I ordered. "We have a problem here and this isn't helping it."

"Get off Randy's back," Dallas said stubbornly.

I knew the look in his eyes. Arguing would be fruitless.

"All right. For now. But no pyrotechnics tonight. Probably not for the rest of the tour." I looked at Dallas. "You could have been burned alive or killed by the weight of the metal when it came down. I'm not budging on this."

"Fine." He bit off the word. "Just...leave Randy alone."

Just because Dallas felt guilty didn't mean I could take eyes off a suspect. I'd just have to handle it differently.

I nodded and turned to Randy. "Just so we're all clear, if you're the one behind all this the party's over."

"Yeah? Well, you can all go fuck yourselves. I don't need this." He turned to head off the stage.

Ignoring the rest of us, Dallas strode after him, calling his name. I watched him grab Randy's arm and talk to him.

"Don't let either of them out of your sight," I told Mike. "And I want eyes on Randy at all times."

"I'm on it," he said, moving toward the two men.

I turned back to Chase. "I want every one of the lights checked. Twice. Including right before the show starts. Have your man work with whoever on the crew handles the lighting. He'll know if the roadie's being straight with him. And get the lighting truss out of there. Now."

For a moment I felt dizzy at the realization of what might have happened if Chase hadn't sent someone to check the setup. Fortunately for all of them Dallas had been nowhere near the truss when it broke loose. And the flash paper hadn't ignited. But holy god! The realization that he could have been killed was making me ill. I swallowed against the rising nausea and dug deep for the control I needed.

Had I somehow slipped up here? I knew all about special lighting and special rigging. Why hadn't I expected something like this? Had last night with Dallas taken the edge off my awareness? It was a damn good thing I'd made the changes in the security assignments.

"This was just a fucking accident." Todd made notes on his clipboard, still grumbling.

God. Just once I'd like to work with a road manager who had a passably pleasant personality. "I don't think so. And I'm not willing to risk Dallas' life on that supposition. Are you?"

He heaved an exaggerated sigh. "No. We need the big man in one piece. But I'm telling you, it's not my damn fucking fault. Or Randy's." He stormed away.

Everyone seemed so bent on protecting Randy. Was it just compassion for his situation or was there more to it? Was Randy really behind this? Were any of the others in it with him? I gave myself a mental shake. It just wasn't possible that the people getting rich from Dallas Creed wanted him dead but I'd seen stranger things.

I looked at my watch. The time was just past five o'clock, the temperature of a hot Texas day hitting its zenith. I'd chosen the lightest-weight fabrics for my outfit in deference to the expected heat, but wearing the gun made it impossible for me to remove my jacket. Feeling dampness under my arms and along my spine, I wished someone would invent a miracle fabric that kept you cool or warm, no matter the temperature. I wiped my clammy palms against my slacks and let out a slow breath.

Chase walked back to me and nodded toward the stage. "Looks like the argument's over. Mike's getting ready to walk Dallas to his trailer. My team and I will be split between the band and the road crew."

"Okay. Just be sure everyone knows to stay alert. I'll walk with Mike and Dallas."

Morgan pushed himself off the wall where he'd been leaning to come stand beside me, his arm draped over my shoulder.

"Ease up, Charley. Your guys caught trouble before it hatched and everyone's hyperaware right now. Let's go to the trailer and chill."

I sighed. "I don't think I'll chill until this is all over."

I kept my eyes on Dallas talking to two of the band members, Mike practically glued to his side.

"You know I'd like nothing better than for the two of you to work things out." Morgan's voice was soft in my ear.

I sighed. "We have a lot of history to get past."

"All it takes is wanting to."

I hoped he was right about that.

Dallas jogged down the short flight of stairs from the stage carrying his guitar. When he made eye contact with me I couldn't miss the heat simmering in his gaze. At forty-three years old, with a lot of miles on him, Dallas Creed still moved in a cloud of sexual energy. Or maybe again it was the residual effect of the previous night. Whatever it was, Dallas was right. Things were far from over between us.

Despite our best efforts there was the possibility somehow the shooter followed us to the arena. The open space between the facility and the trailer gave him a big target so instead of walking I told Mike to bring the SUV right up to the entrance. I wasn't taking any more chances.

"This is like a bad movie," Dallas grumbled as we maneuvered him into the vehicle and drove to the trailer.

"Maybe we should cancel the rest of the tour," Morgan offered once we were inside.

"You can forget that." Dallas dropped heavily onto the couch. "I'm not letting some disgruntled idiot disrupt my life."

"In case you didn't notice," I said slowly, "it's already disrupted. But I agree. Hiding would only delay the inevitable. We'll get the sucker, I promise you."

I checked the time on my watch. "Food should be here any minute. Let's eat and give Dallas some time to rest before the media thing. Then we'll head back to the arena."

"I'm rested," he said. He was lying on the couch, the Houston Texans ball cap pulled over his forehead. "Didn't get much sleep last night but it didn't seem to bother me."

I could almost sense Morgan's smile and turned my back to him, pulling out my smartphone to check for messages. I was still fiddling with it when someone knocked on the door. Mike opened it, gun in hand but carefully concealed by his leg.

"Spring Catering." A tall, skinny kid stood there with a clipboard in his hand and a company cap that seemed too big for him.

Mike took the clipboard and studied it, then stuck his head out the door and looked both ways. "Okay. Bring it in."

"You guys got this place here blocked off," he whined. "Can someone move a car so we can pull the truck up? We got trays to carry for three different trailers."

"Exercise is good for you," Mike told him.

The kid made a face then jogged back to the catering truck. It was all accomplished very smoothly, including the food for the band and road crew, which Chase supervised.

"All present and accounted for," he radioed. "And I have three men hanging out at the arena to keep an eye on things there."

"Good. Go get yourself something to eat. It's probably going to be a long night."

* * * * *

Unbelievably, the media frenzy went off with a minimum of fuss, thanks in large part to Mike and Chase. They scouted the area microscopically before we brought Dallas out and fed him to the fishes at a spot near the trailers. We didn't necessarily expect a sniper on the roof of the arena or someone hidden in the trees but my team prepared for every eventuality. If Dallas was tense about the reporters he didn't show it. Dressed for the concert, he appeared relaxed and at ease, trading jokes and deflecting questions he didn't want to answer.

Beyond our perimeter I could see the steady stream of cars flowing into the parking lot and people making their way into their seats, or claiming a place on the hill behind the back wall. The facility held ten thousand under roof with space for five thousand more on the lawn. Morgan had told me the concert was sold out. For a brief moment I

felt nauseous at the possibility that our killer would disguise himself in the crowd and find a way to make another attempt. But as soon as it came, the thought disappeared.

I couldn't see the killer trying another shot. He—or she—had failed three times now. And if they were aware of the security arrangements they'd know it would be too difficult to set up again.

Sawyer was front and center, one of my men at his elbow. I had to admit he handled the whole thing like a maestro conducting an orchestra. Everyone got a chance to ask a question, and Sawyer made sure to tell the reporters that merchandise sales were strong as well as national sales of the latest CD. We were just about to load Dallas into the SUV for the ride across the grass to the arena when one of the reporters raised a hand.

"Hey, Dallas," he shouted. "Who's the good-looking female watching you over there? I don't remember seeing her before."

Usually when I worked one of these gigs reporters paid little attention to me, but Dallas Creed was a different animal from my other clients. His fall from grace and revival were hot news. I started to step forward with my standard answer but Dallas just smiled at the question.

"An old friend I grew up with. She's my guest at the concert but don't get any ideas. And let's not embarrass her or I might not see her again for another twenty years." He held up a hand. "That's all, guys. Thanks, but it's time for me to go to work."

Arena security politely ushered the mob away and we hustled Dallas into the SUV and over to the arena. When we were safely inside I let myself relax just a fraction.

Dallas closed his hand over my arm. "We never did have our talk, Charley," he murmured in my ear. "And we definitely have things to discuss."

Before I could answer him I heard loud voices raised outside the stage door and Chase's radio crackled. He listened, answered and he motioned to me.

"It seems we have a little problem that needs your authority to handle it."

I frowned. "What's going on?"

"Come on. You'll see."

We opened the door and a cacophony of female voices blasted at me. A small crowd of females surrounded my agent. Groupies. Girls from their teens on up in tight jeans, tighter tops and makeup laid on with a trowel. And they were all screaming at him. Chase and I pushed our way through to him.

"What's the deal?" I gave thanks that none of my team members ever lost their cool. He waved his hand over the group.

"These young ladies are very unhappy that I won't honor their backstage passes," he told me.

A willowy blond turned to stare at me, her eyes spitting fire. "We were promised we'd watch the show from backstage," she snapped. "Who the hell are you to keep us out?"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw that Mike was keeping Dallas in the SUV. Good.

"Different security rules, ladies," I told them in an even voice. There were already too many people wandering around backstage as far as I was concerned. And supposedly they were all legit. "No backstage passes this tour."

"Todd said it was okay," a redhead pouted.

Todd had a reality check coming.

"I'm sure he had good intentions," I said smoothly. "But the rules have changed. If you'll all behave we'll set up chairs at the side for you and I'll make sure you get t-shirts signed by Dallas."

It wasn't what they wanted but they finally realized I wasn't budging. Chase radioed instructions back to his team and I hunted backstage until I found Todd checking electrical cords.

"No backstage passes," I reminded him. "You know we're under tight security. We just had a little scene outside because someone didn't get the memo."

"The guys will bitch up a storm without their females," he said without turning to look at me.

"The *guys* understand what's going on, Todd. And I don't appreciate you going around me on something like this. We can't have strange people walking around back here. You saw what happened with the truss and that was with only people we know here."

He shrugged. "Whatever. You're the boss."

Whatever. Thanks for your support, Todd. And your sparkling personality.

"I promised them signed t-shirts. Give Chase access to your stash so he can take care of it. And no backstage passes for the rest of the tour. Period."

"Fine." He walked off without ever having looked at me.

Lord deliver me from road managers. And I was damn sick of everyone saying fine like it was a curse.

Then we were caught up in getting ready for the show, checking security at all the points we'd marked. Dallas went off in a corner by himself as he usually did, tuning his guitar and psyching himself up for the show. I left Mike standing watch over him and eyeballed the stage area one more. I was extra skittish from the light truss incident and the stupid groupies.

"All set out here," Chase told me. "Even the Secret Service would be happy with our safety checks. No more accidents and that's a promise."

It was almost zero hour. Todd checked everyone's amp connections himself, still muttering under his breath. When he was satisfied, he opened a cooler backstage and passed out bottled water to everyone. He nudged Dallas who was lost in thought, concentrating on tuning his guitar one last time, and handed him his orange juice. Then he left with his pen and yellow pad of paper to take his seat in the front.

Then it was showtime. Tonight I watched from the wings, but despite trying to look in a million directions at once I found the show no less compelling. Dallas had it, all right, whatever it was that set him apart from the almost and wannabes. He stood there in front of his mic, guitar hanging easily from the leather strap with the initials D. C. intricately tooled into it, waiting as the first notes from the synthesizer floated out from the stage. Setting the mood. Setting the tone. Then the rhythm guitars hit their downstroke, the band broke into the intro to *Cowboys Do It Right*, the curtain slid open and the crowd screamed their insane adulation.

In the five years since I opened the agency I'd lost count of the number of concerts I'd worked. The performers had just been names to me, the music nothing more than background noise. I'd learned early on to depersonalize everything if I wanted to be effective. They were just jobs, contracts to be fulfilled.

But watching and listening to Dallas it was impossible to be emotionally detached. The excitement of the audience, the energy flowing from the stage—a person would have to be dead to be unaffected. Especially listening to Dallas' whiskey voice caress the words of the songs. My body zinged as, unbidden, I remembered that mouth last night everywhere on me, doing wickedly clever things to me. I knew with a certainty it would be doing the same things tonight.

* * * * *

Dallas was grateful for the Roper people who got him away from the arena and back to his trailer as soon as the show ended. For one thing, he'd pushed himself onstage and his leg was beginning to ache. For another, he was itchy under the skin and it had nothing to do with the layer of sweat he built up while performing. Charley had been doing her best to keep her distance all day, a fact that irritated him more than he wanted to admit. If she thought last night was an aberration she was very much mistaken. He'd managed to kick the door open and he wasn't about to let it close again.

He showered at the trailer, forcing himself to come down from the performance high. Then he changed into shorts and a t-shirt and downed two small bottles of orange juice in a hurry, rehydrating himself. Nibbled a little on the fruit and cheese on the platters in the living room as he watched Charley pace. She was talking on her little radio or her damn BlackBerry she never went anywhere without.

He knew why she'd avoided personal face-time with him all day. She was scared. Scared to open up her heart again and have him shred it once more. He couldn't exactly blame her. He'd wait while she hid from him behind her gadgets and her blasted detail lists. Sooner or later they had to go back to the hotel. Morgan had told him she'd switched with Mike and she would be taking the night shift with him. That was promising, right? When they were finally alone again she wouldn't be able to hide from him anymore.

"Excellent crowd tonight." Sawyer was rubbing his hands together. "Dallas, we nearly sold out of all the merchandise. I'm having to order more for Atlanta and Tampa." He looked at Morgan. "I'll get you a copy of the report."

"Thanks." Morgan's face was expressionless. "I'll see how it matches up with the one I asked the promoter for."

"It'll match up just fine."

Dallas was sure he could reach out and touch the anger that always crackled between the two men. He wished he could find some way to ease the tension that flared up whenever they were in the same room. Still, he was more than grateful that Morgan had stepped into the role he was playing. One thing Dallas had never been good at was keeping track of things. It had certainly gotten him in a big hole before. He was glad Morgan was there to keep it from happening again.

Then it was time for the usual post-performance visitors—the promoter, maybe the promoter's assistant, a couple of people either Sawyer or the promoter wanted to glad-hand, someone from the record label. Under normal circumstances having all these people in the trailer wouldn't be a problem, but now Charley was limiting access. Despite the bitching she only let them in two or three at a time. And Sawyer, for once, was a help in making it happen, handing out signed Dallas Creed t-shirts to soothe ruffled feathers.

Dallas was glad when everyone had finally left. The tour was definitely taking its toll. He'd been thinking more and more about starting his own label, signing other artists, finally getting off the road. He and Morgan had discussed it in passing, planning to go into detail when this tour was over. He wondered what Charley would think of the idea. He could even build a recording studio at the ranch. God knew there was enough land and they could soundproof it so it didn't scare the cattle.

Then Todd was there, with a clipboard of notes on the night's performance. After him the wardrobe guy taking Dallas' stage clothes to be cleaned. Nothing unusual, but tonight it seemed to Dallas that the whole world was moving around in that trailer.

Finally everyone had been politely ushered out and Dallas was ready to scream with the need to get out of there and be alone with Charley. She hooked the radio to the belt of her jeans and shoved the BlackBerry in her pocket.

"Time to head back to the hotel," she told him. "I'll feel a lot better when you're locked down for the night."

"I'm ready." He had his own idea of what that locking down would mean.

They rode to the hotel in uneventful silence and again took the freight elevator. Mike checked the corridor carefully before they stepped out into it.

"I'll head to my room," he told Charley, "if you don't need me anymore tonight. I already had the hotel switch our stuff."

"Go ahead," she told him. "But do me a favor, will you? Call and make sure the guards we hired are watching the planes. Let me know if there's a problem. I don't

want to show up for tomorrow's flights and have a repeat of yesterday's problem. I'll touch base with Chase and make sure everyone else is secured for the night."

"The band and some of the crew wanted to hit some bar or other so Chase sent a couple of the men along with them." He grinned. "Boys' night out."

"Call him to keep an eye out for anyone they spend a lot of time with. I'll see you in the morning."

"Early breakfast again?"

Charley shook her head. "No, I think around ten. We've got two days until the next show in Atlanta, so if we don't leave until early afternoon we'll still be okay." She looked at Dallas and Morgan. "I've changed all the hotels in case word got out somehow where you were staying. The men I have riding with the band and the road crew will make sure they get the information just before we reach Atlanta."

Morgan nodded at both of them. "Then I'll see you at breakfast."

In the suite Dallas dropped onto the couch and turned on the television, watching as he'd done in the trailer to see if Charley's glance strayed to his leg. He'd thought about changing into old jeans in the trailer, but he was always so hot and sweaty after a performance that shorts felt more comfortable. Anyway, if he was going to get naked again with her, there'd be no hiding the scars. So far she hadn't commented on them and didn't seem repulsed by them. He'd just have to find a way to deal with them if they became an issue. For him it was more about reminding him of the road to destruction he'd followed before and what his life had become now.

But how to explain it to Charley if and when she asked?

He forced himself to stay on the couch while Charley did her walk-through, flicking through the television channels and biding his time.

"All clear," she said, coming out of his bedroom and double-checking all the locks on the outside door to the suite.

"You really think someone's going to try busting through the doors to get to me?" If the situation hadn't been so serious he might have been amused by the image it conjured up.

"I think I can't afford to take any chance. Okay. I think I'll just go to my room now, but I'll leave the door open so I can hear anything if I'm needed."

He was on his feet before she could walk away, grabbing her hand as she turned toward her room. No chance she was getting away now. He was close enough to inhale the light fragrance that was distinctively Charley, a heady scent that immediately made his cock swell and his heart rate skip up a beat. All the tension of the evening began to fade as the familiar tangle of erotic threads began to wind around him. He could almost feel the knot in each muscle unravel.

"I need you, Charley. And not in another bedroom. Morgan told me you were taking the night duty. Did you think after last night I'd let you sleep in another room?"

"Dallas..."

She tried to tug her hand free but he tightened his fingers. Where his thumb rested on the inside of her wrist, he could feel the kick of her pulse, an erratic rhythm that told him just how affected by him she was. She could deny it all she wanted but her body said something different.

"I was singing for you tonight, you know."

Her body tensed and the pulse beneath his thumb ratcheted up its pace.

"What we had, Charley? It isn't over. Last night was proof of that." He pulled her closer. "We made a big mistake years ago, darlin'. *I* made a big mistake. I was a dumb kid with stars in my eyes and I didn't respect your choices. But I've had a lot of time to think about it. Too much time."

She sighed and shook her head. "I'm so confused."

"You weren't confused last night," he pointed out.

"But can I trust that it's more than that?" she cried. "Put myself out there with you again?"

"Isn't that why you took the night assignment? So we could be together and you could find out?"

His hands tightened on her. "I want you to listen to me." Jesus. Was that desperation in his voice? Okay, he was desperate. He needed her to pay attention to what he had to say. No, he flat out just needed her. "Just hear me out. Please. Last night..." He let out a slow breath. "It was good, Charley. Terrific. Fantastic. Admit it. You never lied to me. Don't start now."

"But was it enough?" He could see all the questions in her eyes. "Is it more than just sex? How can we be sure? How can *I* be sure?"

"Let's start with that and find out."

He moved both hands to cup her face and hold it still as his mouth took hers in a hungry kiss. The moment his lips touched hers, his body reacted. His already-hard cock swelled even more and the familiar tingling raced through his balls. Her lips were so soft, like brushed velvet. He let his tongue trace the line of them, then whisper over the surface. When Charley opened her mouth as if to protest, his tongue darted in, sweeping the hot, wet inner surface.

God, it was like tasting the finest brandy, sweet and sharp at the same time and very, very heady. She wanted to pull back from him but the longer he held the kiss, the more he felt the resistance drain from her body. Her hands, which had pressed to his chest to push him away, slipped to his upper arms and gripped his biceps, her fingers hot against his skin.

He wanted to slide his hand over every bit of her, peel off her clothing until all her soft, satiny skin was exposed. Touch her everywhere at once. Every crevice and crease of her body. But he needed to pay attention to the physical signals from her so he could bring her to the point where any resistance would be token at best.

And so he poured everything into the kiss, using his tongue to wake up the tiny bundles of nerves in her mouth, seducing her with his lips against hers. Drawing her breath into his own mouth until they were breathing together and the grip of her fingers on his arms suddenly pulled him closer. His heartbeat sped up as she responded to him, softening against him.

His leg was aching now. Two hours of standing on it and moving around the stage usually took its toll. He'd have to sit down—*lie* down—pretty soon before he *fell* down. Hoping he didn't fall on his ass and make a fool of himself, he took a chance and lifted her into his arms, striding toward his bedroom.

She pulled her mouth away from his as he moved. "Wait. Stop. Wait."

"Not stopping, Charley. You want this as much as I do. Don't try to tell me differently."

She pushed at him. "That's not it," she gasped. "Your leg. Don't be an idiot about your leg."

But he kept walking, even as slivers of pain shot through his muscle and bone. He wasn't going to act like a damn cripple with her, even if he felt like it sometimes. So he slammed his mouth against hers again and kept walking until finally they reached his bed. Carefully he set her on her feet, balancing himself to take some of the pressure off his leg. He reached over and turned on the nightstand lamp, leaving it on a low setting.

He noted the slight trembling in her hands as she unbuckled the hip holster and set it and the gun on the nightstand.

"I just want you to be careful of it," she said, her eyes still on his face.

"I'll worry about my damn leg later," he growled. "Last night I was in a rush. Tonight I want to see what you look like. All of you."

When she tried to slip off her jacket he brushed her hands away.

"Dallas—"

"I'll do it. Just stand here and let me look at you, a little bit at a time."

His heart thudded against his ribs as his eyes mapped the familiar lines of her body. He slipped the jacket down her arms and tossed it onto a nearby chair. Beneath it she wore a thin tank top and he could see her nipples pushing at him even through the fabric of her bra and her top. She wasn't moving away from him now, her eyes fixed on him, her wonderful breasts rising and falling with each breath.

She was so sexy. Just as he'd told her, last night he'd been so intent on seducing her he hadn't really taken the time to appreciate her. She had only improved with age, her lithe body toned from the workouts he was sure she still kept up. Her breasts were fuller but still firm, and the nipples had darkened from a blush pink to a dusky rose.

Holding her arms, he bent his mouth to the pulse pounding in the hollow of her throat and sucked at it, pressing his tongue against the irregular beat. He loved the little moan that drifted up from her throat, remembering with stark clarity the little sounds of pleasure that signaled her responses to their lovemaking.

Moving his mouth, he licked his way across her collarbone, tasting the sweetness of her skin, remembering how he could get drunk just from the taste of her. His fingers pulled the clip away that held her hair back and plunged into the rich softness that tumbled free.

With slow, careful movements, he tugged her tank top free of her waistband and drew it over her head. She lifted her arms to help him and her breasts rose, tempting him to suck on her nipples, but he wanted bare skin. He took a moment to trace his tongue over the swell of her breasts, probing into the valley and feeling the thud of her heartbeat.

"Charley, Charley, Charley." His words vibrated against her skin. "God, I've missed your taste."

She tilted her head back and leaned into him, her pelvis pushing against his and the thick hardness of his cock. It flexed with need, pressing hard against the fabric of his shorts. He had to restrain himself from ripping the clothes off both of them and just throwing her down on the bed. *Slow*, he reminded himself.

Take it slow. Last night was good. Make tonight better. Imprint yourself on her.

The bra went next and gave him more skin to lick and taste and nibble, and he took his time doing it. When he reached one nipple, he pulled its hard point into his mouth, closing his lips tightly over it and flicking the tip with his tongue. He was so attuned to her body he could actually feel the bud swell under his touch. When he'd drawn hard on the one, teasing it with his teeth, he turned to the other one, his fingers kneading the firm mounds of her breasts.

And when her moans ratcheted up the fever blazing inside him, his fingers worked the button and zipper on her slacks and pushed them, along with her panties, down to her ankles. He could feel her shaking as she stepped out of them, her fingers gripping his arms.

"Take off your clothes too," she whispered, pulling up his t-shirt. "I want to feel all of you against me."

She shifted back and forth, rubbing her breasts against his chest, the movement making his own nipples harden into swollen pellets and sending jolts of sensation to every nerve ending in his body. Jerking the covers back on the bed, he nudged her onto the sheet, lifting her legs and placing them so her thighs fell open.

"Bend your legs." His voice was so hoarse he almost didn't recognize it. "Let me see that beautiful pussy."

She widened her thighs and bent her knees, planting her feet flat on the bed. His eyes fastened on the glistening pink folds as he stripped off his t-shirt, shorts and boxers. Every memory of tasting it, touching it, feeling it around his cock, slammed into him. He was trembling as he climbed onto the bed between her legs, his eyes drinking in each satiny inch of her.

Sliding his hands beneath her buttocks, he lifted her and placed his open mouth directly over her clit. The hot, intimate kiss made her buck beneath his touch and a

guttural sound rolled up from her throat. He nibbled and sucked and tormented the swollen flesh until one of her cries blended into another and her hips thrust harder at him. At the moment he felt her body tighten, he thrust his tongue into her hot, waiting channel, fucking her with it. Lapping up her cream. Hands tightening on her buttocks to hold her in place, he drank and drank and drank from her as if he'd never get his fill.

When he lowered her to the bed at last, he bent with her, his tongue drawing a feathery line along the crease between thigh and hip, circling her navel, then moving to her lips and sharing her taste with his mouth.

"I'll never get enough of you," he told her, pressing his hard shaft against the swollen lips of her cunt. "Ever. Not ever, Charley."

Even as she laid there, spent, eyes glazed with passion, he saw her struggle to find words to dispel what was happening. He shook his head.

"No talking. Not now. First I'm going to keep showing you how good we still are together."

Positioning himself, he prodded the opening of her sex with the tip of his penis. As he was about to begin the slow glide into the glove of her body, a sensation of needles and pins raced over his left leg.

Damn it!

Last night they hadn't used protection and the naked feeling had been incredible. They'd discussed it when the first explosion of passion had abated. He was clean. No sex since the accident. And hadn't she just smiled at that. Charley too had been abstinent for a long time, a surprise to *him*, although maybe not, remembering Charley as he'd known her. But, she told him, she still got tested at her annual checkup anyway. And she was on the Pill. Still, at their ages he wasn't about to take any more chances. Clumsily he reached into the nightstand drawer to grab a condom from the box he'd placed there earlier in the day. Then, as smoothly as he could manage, he shifted onto his back, taking Charley with him. She took the latex and rolled it onto him with a slow, deliberate move that nearly sent him straight over the edge. When she straddled him, he gripped her waist with his hands.

"Take me home, Charley," he rasped. "Take me inside you."

Bracing herself with one hand on his chest, she reached down and wrapped her slim fingers around his cock. She lifted herself just enough to maneuver, hovered over him for a moment, her gaze locked with his. Then, so slowly he thought he'd die in the meantime, she lowered herself onto him. His shaft slid into the hot well of her cunt, her tight flesh clasp around him.

Dallas sucked in a breath as heat flashed through him. Nothing, absolutely nothing in his life had ever felt this good. He held them perfectly still for a long moment, his hands on her waist, watching passion darken her face. Then she began the ride. He guided her at first but she soon took control, riding him for all he was worth.

He moved his hands to her breasts, thumbs rasping her nipples, fingers kneading the silken flesh, and he found himself winding tighter and tighter. When he felt his

orgasm begin to gather, he moved one hand to her clit and massaged the swollen nub, watching her face for signs that she was ready. She clamped down hard on him just as his balls tightened and drew up and icy fingers tickled his spine.

"Now!" She threw back her head and pushed down hard, the release grabbing them both.

He thought he heard himself shout her name but she was screaming his at the same time. They shuddered together, his cock pulsing inside her, his hands gripping her hard to keep her in place as his release flooded the latex sheath.

Exhausted, her muscles still quivering, she fell forward, her head resting on his shoulder. Her warm breath fanned across his damp chest as she drew air into her lungs, and the pounding of her heart mingled with his.

This! This is what he'd missed all these years. Being inside Charley was like coming home. He'd chased a dream and captured it, but nearly killed himself because he'd lost his anchor. He wrapped his arms around her, thinking how resentful he'd been when Morgan said he'd hired her, still bitter that she'd walked out of his life so easily.

But maybe it hadn't been any easier for her than it had been for him. The mistake could be laid on both of them, him for doing it so poorly and not remembering her stiff-backed pride, and Charley for her knee-jerk reaction, walking out without a backward glance. They had a chance now to put it back together. Somehow he had to make her see that it was the right thing to do.

He held her close to him, the only sound in the room their erratic breathing, the scent of sex enveloping him, and he swallowed a sigh. If only they could stay like this forever.

"I should have had wine for you," he murmured. "Maybe soft music. You deserve all the romantic frills."

Her chuckle was low and sexy. "I'm not sure I'd even have noticed, to tell you the truth."

When he felt he could move, he lifted her from his body and rolled her so she was beside him. "Do not move from this bed. That's a direct order."

She smiled at him, that slow tremulous smile that he'd carried in his heart for so long and tried without success to forget. "I don't think I can, anyway."

"I'll be right back."

He disposed of the condom and splashed cold water on his face. His leg was still bothering him and he knew he'd need to put hot packs on it the next day. Limping back into the bedroom, he smiled at the sight of Charley still where he'd left her, watching him with those dark, liquid eyes. When he slid into bed and pulled her against him, she rested her head against his chest, her fingers idly playing with the hair there.

"We need to talk, Dallas."

"Yes, honey, I believe we do."

Chapter Eleven

Oh yes, we definitely needed to talk. All these years and I was still just as much in love with him. Time and distance hadn't changed my feelings for him one bit. But now what? The chemistry was definitely still there – that had never been a problem for us – but we had so many issues between us. Better to face them sooner rather than later.

"Okay."

I dusted my hand across his chest. I'd always loved to play with the springy curls of hair that covered him like a soft pelt. They were a darker gold now and slightly peppered with gray, a sign that the boy had given way to the man. Yet despite his age and all he'd been through, his chest muscles were still firm and the skin still stretched taut.

"Okay we'll talk?" he asked.

I was so engrossed in twining my fingers through the soft curls his voice startled me. "Yes. Okay we'll talk." I propped myself up on one elbow. "Who goes first?"

"Me. I think that's the most appropriate."

"So. Let's hear it then."

I watched his face carefully, especially his eyes. Even in the soft light from the lamp I'd know if he was handing me some kind of fairy tale. But it was hard to concentrate as his restless hand moved over me, touching me here and there. Leaving marks that were invisible but felt like hot brands. Stroking the soft inner flesh of my thighs, the upper slope of my breasts. How on earth was I supposed to concentrate? But I didn't want him to stop either.

Dallas cleared his throat. "I know you think my biggest mistake was dumping everything on you the way I did –"

I lifted my hand from his chest and touched my fingers to his lips. "Wait." It was time for me to own up to my part in the fiasco. "The fault wasn't all yours, much as I hate admitting it. Why didn't you ever tell me exactly how much your music meant to you? I thought it was just a good-time hobby. Was I so focused on 'the plan' for our future that you didn't think I'd listen?"

His gaze drifted to a point beyond my shoulder and I knew he wasn't looking at me but at something from the past.

"That's true but you have to understand how we got to that point." He paused, shifting to look at me again, his eyes studying my face for some sort of clue.

"Go ahead," I told him.

"I felt like I was on a train," he said, "one going so fast I didn't know how to get off. You remember when my mother died? Morgan and I were just in our teens."

I nodded. Sarah Creed had fought a valiant battle with uterine cancer. It affected everyone who knew her.

"Then Dad had that massive heart attack and was just...gone. One day he was here, the next day he wasn't." His voice was laced with remembered pain. "I was really close to him."

Of course he was. Who wouldn't be? Roger Creed was a man larger than life who loved his sons and instilled a love of the land in them. But later, looking back on it, trying to analyze just how everything had blown up in my face, I sometimes wondered if Dallas had been pushed into ranch life just because his father expected it.

"He always planned for you and Morgan to take over the ranch so he could cut back a little."

"That's right. After he died things just moved along so fast I couldn't catch my breath. Morgan had plans for the ranch that I was supposed to share with him. You were determined to pick up your brother's torch with the FBI. Everything was all neatly plotted out." He closed his eyes. "And every day that went by I got a bigger stomach ache."

"You should have said something." I winced at the tone of accusation in my voice.

"Give me a break, Charley. I knew I was going to disappoint a lot of people and that was a hard thing to face."

"But no one was asking you what you wanted," I said softly, my hand unclenching and my fingers idly tracing patterns on his chest.

"And maybe it was just as much my fault for not telling everyone to take a time-out and listen to what I had to say."

"So what happened after you and I broke up? I guess you and Morgan had a go-round about everything."

"You got that right." He sighed heavily. "The band and I picked up gigs wherever we could." His soft laugh was more ironic than humorous. "It wasn't the lap of luxury, that's for sure. Sometimes we even slept in the trucks when we didn't have money for a motel. But god, I just wanted to write those songs and play them. Listen to the crowds. Make my mark that had nothing to do with the Creed Ranch or the family name."

"And then Sawyer Black came along."

He nodded. "Popped into that bar one night while he was driving to some small town. Just looking for a few minutes out of the rain. After that it seemed I got pushed onto another train racing headlong down the tracks."

"He paid for your demo, right?"

His mouth twisted in a grin. "Oh yeah. Sawyer paid for everything. Hauled our asses to Nashville, put us up in a motel, got us a place to rehearse and a place to cut the songs. It seems like after that my life's never been the same."

I had to ask the question that had been burning in my brain since I'd gone to the concert the other night. "Was it all worth it? Did you get what you want?"

He was silent for so long I wasn't sure he was going to answer me.

"That's two separate issues," he said at last. He was staring over my shoulder again, his gaze unfocused. "Was it worth it? Is anything worth it when you realize you've lost the most important thing in the world?"

"Your family." My fingers tightened in the curls on his chest.

"Yes, Charley." His eyes shifted to my face. "But that includes you. I didn't realize it until I threw it all away that you and Morgan were the structure in my life. And that you lived in my heart."

I blinked against the sudden burning. I would not cry, damn it.

Dallas sighed. "You don't have to say anything. I know what I lost. Did I get what I want? Maybe, but then when I got it I wasn't sure I wanted it after all."

"You were a big star," I pointed out. "Huge."

"Yeah, but I had no one to share it with. I loved the music, the excitement. All that." His arm tightened around me. "But it wasn't all that much up there by myself. Trust me."

I moved my arm and leaned my head on his chest. "Tell me about the accident."

Again there was a long silence before he spoke.

"Do you know what a downstroke is, Charley?"

"Sure. When you drag the pick from the top string to the bottom."

"That's what I did to myself. One stroke from the top to the bottom." The fingers of one hand rubbed my arm. "I was right at the very top. Headliner everywhere. Selling out every show. Dallas Creed. The biggest fucking deal in country-rock music."

"And?" I prodded.

"I kept trying to bury myself in drugs and booze. Fill the empty spaces inside me. I'd kicked you and Morgan both to the curb and everybody else just wanted to suck what they could get out of me. I was driving back to the house I'd bought outside Austin one night, in the pouring rain, drunk and stoned out of my mind, and rolled the truck over a cliff. I'm damn lucky I didn't kill myself."

"Oh Dallas." I couldn't help it. One fat tear plopped onto his chest.

"Don't cry for me, darlin'. I wasn't worth it." He bent his head enough to touch his lips to my forehead. "I did it to myself."

"But you pulled it together again," I pointed out, trying to get the words out past the unfamiliar tightness in my throat.

"Only because my brother is a better person than I am and decided to take pity on me."

Another silence settled between us.

"How's the leg holding up?" I asked.

"Okay. After a concert it always bothers me. Tomorrow as soon as we get to Atlanta I'll hang out in the hotel room and put heat packs on it. Then I'll be okay."

I pushed myself up, struck by a thought. "You probably shouldn't be doing any exercise like this that puts more strain on it."

Dallas pulled me back down to him. "It's worth every twinge." He chuckled. "Anyway, that's why you got to be on top. Charley, you need to let me get this all out."

"All right." I settled against him again, not sure I wanted to hear.

"Not one day has passed that I haven't regretted what happened between us. I was young and a hothead and too full of myself. I couldn't understand why you just couldn't see why this was important to me."

"But I didn't —"

"Even know what it meant," he finished. "I know. My fault. For not telling you what was really going on with me. You can't begin to know how sorry I am. Charley, I never for one minute stopped caring about you, or missing you. The music wasn't nearly as good without you."

I was so afraid to trust the words. I'd wrapped myself in pain for so many years I was reluctant to let go of it, hugging it to me like an old friend. And there was still so much for us to talk about. Including my side. How I'd felt.

You're a chicken, Charley.

I could hear my father's voice in my head whenever I'd been afraid to do something. He loved me unconditionally but it was his way of telling me to fight my fear. Now he was inside my head telling me to suck it up and deal with it when I really wanted to run away and hide. I'd about been ready to convince myself Dallas and I could have sex and nothing would be affected. Now I had to look at this from a whole new perspective.

"I have more to say," he went on, "but maybe it's your turn now."

My turn. Well, hell. Where did I start?

I wet my lips. "You know how Will's death devastated me," I began.

"Yes. He was your hero." A soft chuckle slid from his mouth. "Would you believe sometimes I was even jealous of that hero worship?"

I lifted my head to look at him. "Jealous? Of Will? Why?"

"I wanted to be the only hero in your life. Anyway, go on."

"From the moment he was killed in that shootout I knew I'd have to pick up where he left off. Sort of my homage to him, you know?"

"I do. That's all you talked about."

I felt a bubble of regret rising in me. "But I never talked about *you*, did I?" I said sadly. "Or really talked *to* you. I was too fixated on the perfect life I'd planned out for us. And I take all the responsibility for that."

"Let's skip all that part for the moment. Why did you leave the FBI?"

A good question. One I'd made up a lot of excuses for over the years. But would Dallas understand? I sighed.

"In order to do its job properly," I began, "the FBI is run by strict rules and regulations. The regs are everything."

Dallas lifted his other hand and stroked my face. "And you never were much for strict rules, were you, darlin'?"

"I guess not. After five years I felt like I was choking. And Hillcroft came along about then with their offer. It was not only timely but also too good to refuse. And I spent several really excellent years with them."

"But in the end you went out on your own."

I smiled. "You know me. I was always better when no one else was telling me what to do."

"Do you ever regret it, Charley? What happened to us?"

And that was the elephant in the room. Of course I regretted it, but I'd been mad for so long I wondered if I could shift gears. And how did I answer Dallas? I blew out a breath. Truth time, I guess.

"Regret was mixed up with a lot of things, Dallas. Anger. Pain. Refusal to accept any responsibility on my part. Hurt that you didn't come crawling back to me and beg my forgiveness."

He shifted me so I was half lying on his chest, our faces a scant inch apart. "Really? Crawling back?"

Then I saw the smile. "Okay. It was my fantasy. That you'd realize you couldn't live without me and beg me to forgive you."

His eyes were looking straight into mine. "Is it too late for that now?"

"To crawl?" Butterflies were doing the *paso doble* in my stomach and I felt as if my entire body trembled. Did he really mean what he said? I'd learned the hard way that hope could be a real killer.

"If I need to, Charley."

His face was dead serious, his eyes full of emotion. Oh god, I wanted to believe him so much.

"I think it might not be good for your leg." I tried to joke.

But Dallas was dead serious. "I love you, Charley. I never stopped. Maybe you're not ready yet to hear it from me, but there it is." His hand moved restlessly over my back, my shoulders, the curve of my buttocks. "We'll take it slow. Go as slow as you want. But give it a chance. Please? That's all I'm asking."

"A chance."

"My brother was willing to open that door." One warm hand moved up to the nape of my neck and lean fingers sifted through my hair. "Are you?"

Okay, so there it was. The big question. I nodded, because when all was said and done, it was what I really wanted. The armor I'd kept around my heart for so long shattered into tiny pieces.

"We'll go slowly, just like you said?"

"As slow as you want." His lips brushed over mine. "I know you're not ready yet to say the words back to me, and that's okay. I can wait." Another soft whisper of a kiss. "But someone else can sleep in that other bedroom. That work for you?"

I couldn't help the grin that curved my lips. "Well, I *am* your nighttime security detail now."

"All right then." He moved me off his body and to the side, startling me by swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

"Where are you going?"

"To get my guitar. I want you to hear something."

I stared at him. "Now? Now you want to play the guitar?"

"I want you to hear this," he insisted.

The guitar case was lying on the dresser. He snapped it open and lifted out the guitar, picking up the soft cloth beneath it to wipe it down.

"Fuck." His voice had a strange quality to it. "Charley?" He stood there as if frozen. "I think we have a real problem."

I frowned. "What's the matter?"

When he turned around he was holding a slip of paper by one corner. He brought it back to the bed and dropped it in my lap.

I stared at it. The letters were crudely drawn in what looked like crayon.

Your luck won't hold forever.

We stared at each other.

Finally Dallas said, "I'd like to know how the hell this got in my guitar case."

My throat was suddenly so dry I wondered if I'd scratch it by speaking. I could hardly believe that with all the security in place, someone had been able to get close enough to the guitar case to do this.

"It was lying under the guitar." His voice was so tight it sounded as if it might break. "Charley? How the fuck did this get in there?"

"I don't know but I'm going to find out. I want to know where this case was every minute during the concert."

I was doing my best to keep myself calm even though my heart was racing. Someone had slipped beneath the radar backstage and left this note. Shit! We were leaking security all over the place. So much for our reputation as the best of the best. I'd be lucky if even Morgan's faith wasn't stretched to the breaking point. Never mind that the way these concerts were set up I'd probably need a hundred bodies to block off every bit of access. No one would be interested in excuses. Least of all me.

I climbed out of bed and grabbed some tissues from the bathroom. Taking the sheet of paper from Dallas, using the same corner he'd touched. I placed it in a protective covering of the tissues and put it on the dresser. In the morning I'd use my little travel

kit to see if we could lift prints. Then I could “read” them with one of the new scanners the agency had recently bought. They were nifty little things that synced with a computer, in this case the network back at my offices. I didn’t hold out any hope that there’d really be a print but I had to try.

I finally coaxed Dallas back to bed and curled up against him, stroking his broad chest in an effort to calm him.

“If you and Morgan want to replace my agency I can fully understand,” I told him in a scratchy voice. “We’ve obviously made some stupid mistakes and I won’t gamble with your life.”

His arm tightened around me. “No one’s replacing anybody, Charley. Shit happens. I trust you to find out what’s wrong and fix it. Besides, I don’t think anyone else would have a personal interest in guarding my body. Right?”

“I just want to keep you alive.”

“And I believe you can do it. In the morning you can call the troops together and we’ll go from there.” He hugged me against him. “But get any thought of leaving out of your head.”

* * * * *

Heartless lay on his back in the darkness and stared at the ceiling. He really wanted to fall asleep but his brain was giving him no rest. How had such a simple project gone straight to hell? He thought he’d planned everything so carefully. It should all be over and done with by now, yet Dallas Creed was more alive than ever. And his security detail would be on the alert even more.

The cell phone on his nightstand rang. He looked at the number on the readout and swallowed back the bile that rose in his throat. Why was this man calling *him* instead of his partner? Just what he needed now. An ass-chewing.

He opened the phone and pressed it to his ear. “Yeah?”

“If you’re not the most incompetent idiot in the world,” Cesar Munoz said, “then you give a very good performance of one.”

“Tell your troubles to someone who cares,” Heartless snapped. “I’m tired. Why are you calling me, anyway? I’m not the one you usually talk to.”

“I would be complaining to your partner,” Munoz told him, “but he has his damn phone turned off.”

“A smart thing for him to do.” And why hadn’t *he* thought of doing that?

“Not so smart. Not when I want answers. In case either of you have forgotten, I have a lot of money invested in our joint project and we’re running a greater risk every day of having it fall apart.”

“Yeah?” Heartless rubbed a hand across his forehead. A headache was beginning to build behind his eyes. “In case neither of you have figured it out, *I’m* the one running the risk here.”

"You don't appear to be running it too well," Munoz snapped. "Dallas Creed is apparently still very much alive."

"He's a hard man to kill."

"I understand the brother has hired special security."

How the hell did this man know everything? "You spying on us, Munoz?"

"I have many eyes, my friend. Be aware of that." Silence hummed across the connection. "So bring me up to date on your plans, now that all this new security is in place."

No way was Heartless going to tell this man anything. He was having enough trouble just figuring out how to get around that damn security bitch glued to Dallas' side. Everything had gone to shit since she showed up. And now she was fucking sleeping with Dallas. Just what he needed.

"Are you there?" Munoz's voice snapped him back to the present.

"I'm here. And the extra security is no problem. I'll figure something out."

And maybe a money tree would pop up in his backyard.

"Just remember how much you and your friend are making out of our little operation," Munoz reminded him. "I would hate to have to send my men after you if you fail. Perhaps that will be sufficient motivation for you to get the job done."

Heartless felt a cramp grip his stomach muscles. He'd seen what happened to people who got on the bad side of the cartel leader. He'd almost rather go to prison. Which he and his "partner" would most certainly do if this thing went south. If he didn't have a good reason for all this, he'd never have gotten into it in the first place.

But he had, and now he was trapped.

What a joke that when it was all over, Dallas Creed was going to turn out to be worth more dead than alive. And only a couple of people knew why.

"I'll take care of it," he said, with more assurance than he felt.

"Soon."

The call was disconnected.

Heartless lay there for a moment longer, well aware that time was telescoping for him. He really didn't have much time left to figure this out. Only four more dates to play. The band would leave sometime this morning for the next stop on the tour. Atlanta. He'd probably have a small window of opportunity so he'd better figure out how to be creative.

Okay, he'd tried shooting the guy three different times and that hadn't worked. No chance to get him that way now. Not with that bitch protecting him. He'd planted the note to rattle everyone. Let them know Dallas wasn't all that safe. Get them to change things up so maybe he could spot another opportunity.

He just needed something more creative. The problem was how. He really needed to put his mind to work. Just as soon as he got over this piss of a headache.

Rummaging in the nightstand drawer, he dug for the bottle of aspirin he'd dropped in there. He dry-swallowed two of them, hoping his head didn't explode before the pills could work.

Chapter Twelve

Dallas opened his eyes to a sliver of sunlight slicing in through the tiny opening in the drapes. His body felt sluggish, sated, and he smiled as he remembered why. He'd pulled out all the stops to make the night memorable for Charley. He'd been stupid once and didn't intend to go there again.

Their talk had helped. It was a good start but he wasn't deluding himself. They still had a long way to go. But at least they were together in it now and he wasn't going to take the chance on letting it backslide.

And it occurred to him with much surprise, somewhere in the middle of falling asleep, that if she wanted him to ditch all of this he'd do it in a heartbeat. He'd learned the hard way it meant nothing to him without her.

He shifted in bed and the pleasantly satisfied feeling that had him waking up relaxed and easy was suddenly disturbed as the dull ache in his leg kicked in. Damn. He'd known last night that today probably wouldn't be good. He'd abused the leg and now he was paying for it. He'd have to use the heat packs today or he'd never be able to perform tomorrow night. He hoped Charley had them scheduled for an early takeoff and he could get settled in the hotel in Atlanta.

Charley!

He stretched out an arm seeking warm flesh and there she was.

She smiled at the look on his face. "Did you think I'd be gone? Used your body and left you?"

He punched up the pillows and leaned back on them. "Will you be mad at me if I say guilty as charged?"

She took one of his hands in hers. "I won't say the thought didn't cross my mind. But," she hurried on, when he opened his mouth to speak, "I decided pretending nothing happened wasn't going to make it so. It did happen." He was surprised to see a faint blush color her cheeks.

"Damn right." He reached up to tug her down onto his chest, folding his arms around her. "Don't leave me again, Charley. I'll listen this time. Whatever you want, whatever you need, you've got it. I swear."

"Just be yourself," she told him. "I think we got in trouble before by each of us wanting the other person to be something different. Obviously that didn't work." She pushed herself up a little on her forearms. He could see her face and look directly into her eyes. "This is me telling you I'm not sorry about last night or the night before, and I'm not going anywhere. I can't say the words you want right now, Dallas, because

they've been stuck in the back of my throat for so long I can't get them out. Give me a little time on that, okay?"

He rubbed his hand easily over her back, letting his fingers trace her spine and wander down to the upper slope of her buttocks. God, she just felt so damn good to touch. How had he lived without her all this time?

"It's okay. I understand." And he did. They still had a lot of fences to mend. A shitload, probably. But he was good with it, as long as she was willing to take that first step. And of course spend her nights in his bed rather than alone, in hers. "We'll take it slow, okay? I'll give you as much time as you need. Just as long as you don't try to hide from me."

She pressed a soft kiss on his lips, more affection than passion but his cock still responded.

Down, boy!

"Okay."

"Okay?" He raised an eyebrow. "Just like that?"

Holding her in his arms gave him the first peace he'd felt in years. If his leg didn't bother him so much he'd use it to kick himself in the ass for being such an idiot all those years ago. If not for the fact that some jackass was trying to kill him, he'd think life was just about damn near perfect. He inhaled the wonderful scent of her hair, better than any drug.

He'd thought too many times about what it would be like if he and Charley ever ran into each other again. Would they be cold to each other? Angry? Fight? Walk away? He'd never imagined that life would throw them together in this particular circumstance or that he'd have a second chance with her. When he was with her, when he held her in his arms, he was home. She was everything to him. And maybe he had to be older to recognize and appreciate it.

He wondered if he could convince her they should spend the entire day right where they were, sheltered together, her soft body pressed against his, their shared warmth suffusing them. He didn't want to let her leave the circle of his arms, taking her sweetness with her.

"I really have to get up," Charley murmured, then pushed herself to a sitting position. "I need to shower and get dressed. Use my nifty little kit to dust that paper for prints and then scan them back to the office with my even niftier little reader. Order up some coffee and try to unscramble my thoughts before I call everyone for a meeting. You've got another show in two days and I have to fix what's wrong before then."

He pulled her down against him and wrapped his arms around her. "You'll do it. I believe in you." He brushed a kiss over her lips. "You may not be ready to hear this yet, but I love you, Charley. I willingly put my life in your hands."

He watched her head to her room, eyes fascinated on the delightful sway of her ass. And he decided that leg or no leg, tired or not, a shower with Charley would be just the

thing to start his day off right. They didn't have a lot of time before people began arriving in the suite, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

Gathering his clothing, he headed for Charley's room and dropped his stuff onto the bed. He limped into the bathroom and quietly slid open the shower door. Charley was so lost in thought, eyes closed, letting the water sluice over her, that she didn't even hear him, notice him, until he reached around her and took the bottle of shower gel from her hands.

"Allow me," he murmured in a rough voice, and poured some of the gel into his palm, worked it into a lather.

"What a nice surprise." She turned her head to grin at him. "But we have people showing up here any minute."

"We'll hurry," he whispered, sliding his soapy hands over her body. "I can be quick when I have to."

God, she felt so good. So absolutely right. He cupped her breasts, rubbing the lather into her skin and brushing her nipples with his thumbs. Lust washed through him, swelling his already rock-hard cock even more. He pressed himself against her, letting his shaft rest in the cleft of her buttocks, feeling the tingling in his balls that now erupted whenever he touched her.

Charley leaned back against him, a tiny smile of satisfaction on her face. He moved one of his hands lower to splay over her tummy, pressing the tip of a finger into the indentation of her navel. He was still amazed at the softness of her skin when her body was so toned. Touching her was like touching satin over steel, but steel that melted at his touch and morphed into hot liquid.

One hand reached down to nudge her thighs apart and she moved her feet incrementally, her back still pressed to his chest. His fingers reached into her hot, slick folds, rubbing the lather into the hard knot of her clit and sliding along the smooth flesh of her cunt. She was so hot he wondered if he'd burn his fingers just touching her. But when he slid them inside her and her muscles clamped down on them, he didn't care. All he cared about was bringing her satisfaction, making her come apart and knowing it was just for him.

He was startled when she pushed his hand away abruptly and turned to face him.

"My turn."

Her voice was unsteady and her hands trembled as she poured gel into them and smoothed it over his body. If his cock had been hard before, it was rigid enough to hammer nails the moment she touched him. She stroked him from root to tip, a gentle caress that activated all his nerve endings. When she slipped a hand between his thighs to cup his balls, he sucked in a breath, afraid he'd lose it then and there.

Her hands moved upward and her slim fingers twirled the hair on his chest and her nails scraped across his nipples, drawing a groan all the way from the back of his throat. That was bad enough, but then her hands drifted lower and both of them wrapped around his shaft again, squeezing lightly.

"Shit!"

Okay. That was it.

He reached out to clamp his fingers around her wrists. Who knew that at his age he could get hard so often, so fast? Probably not with anyone else but Charley. But the tightness in his balls and the icy tingling in his back told him he was definitely that close, that fast.

Brushing Charley's hands away, he lifted her, praying he didn't drop her, praying his leg would hold up. But she shook her head. Smiling through the water running down her face, she pushed him to the corner of the shower and down onto the wide seat. Grabbing the condom he'd placed on the shelf, she rolled it onto him, her eyes steady on his. He couldn't help smiling as she climbed on top of him, carefully balancing on her knees and, biting her lower lip, lowered herself onto him with agonizing slowness.

He sucked in a breath as she fitted the entire length of him inside the snug grasp of her walls. Dallas gripped her waist with both hands and opened his eyes to look directly into hers. His heart almost stopped beating at what he saw there. She might not be ready to say the words yet but the intent was clear, her feelings were clear. And he knew he damn well better not screw it up this time.

They set a rhythm, Charley bracing herself on his shoulders, Dallas using his hands to help her, and she rode him with their eyes locked onto each other until the first tremors rose up to grab them. His fingers dug into her waist and his mouth pressed hard against hers as the release swept them both away, taking them to a place that shook him to his core.

She leaned her head on his shoulder as they both struggled to breathe and the water turned cold around them.

"We'd better get out," she told him at last in a shaky breath.

"Guess you're right. But let's do this very carefully."

He thought it was a minor miracle that they could disentangle themselves, turn off the water and step out onto the bath mat without falling and doing themselves great damage.

"You need to get dressed," she reminded him and they dried themselves off.

"Not to worry." He nodded toward the bedroom. "Brought my clothes with me." He grinned. "Couldn't be seen running naked through the living room with an audience, right?"

She gave his chest a light smack. "I think we might be getting too old for calisthenics like that."

"Speak for yourself, old woman." But then he took the sting out of his words by pulling her tightly against him and practically eating her mouth. His tongue thrust inside, dancing with hers, licking every surface, scraping the roof with the tip of his tongue. She dropped her towel to clutch his arms, her breasts rubbing against the hair

on his chest and almost making his cock come to life again. With great regret he thrust her way from him, breathing heavily.

"I hate to disappoint you," he said in a ragged voice, "but I think I'm done for a while. Only if we don't get some clothes on I might kill myself trying to prove myself wrong."

Her laugh was like a cottony cloud of smoke. "I'd love to argue with you but I can't. Besides, we have to hurry. Morgan will be pounding on that door any minute and Todd won't be far behind him."

He made do with one last rough kiss. "Later," he warned. "In Atlanta. I can't wait to do it with you in Atlanta."

She laughed again and began blow-drying her hair.

By the time he'd dried off and pulled on jeans and a t-shirt Charley was waiting for him in the living room, drinking coffee. She'd pulled her hair into a ponytail and wore no makeup except a little lip gloss. And he thought, except for the frown creasing her forehead, she'd never looked more beautiful.

Dallas planted a kiss on her cheek, filled a mug for himself and sat down in one of the armchairs, stretching out his leg on the ottoman.

"Everyone's on the way," she told him and waved at the credenza. "I asked the hotel to set up a breakfast buffet on the credenza."

They sat in silence a moment before Charley added, "You know people are going to be pissed when I point out it has to be someone who has access to you. Band or road crew. All that."

Dallas grimaced. "You don't know how angry that makes me. I've done my best to take care of these guys. Especially Randy. I guess we'll just have to deal with it."

"The fingerprints I managed to get from the paper were so smudged I don't think they'll do us any good but I sent them to the office anyway."

"Dandy."

They sipped coffee, saying little until people began to arrive. Charley had only summoned the key people. They didn't need a mob scene while they tried to figure out how this had happened. One by one they showed up, helped themselves to coffee and food and found seats for themselves. Todd, as usual, just leaned against the wall, watching.

"All right." Charley looked around at everyone. "Here's the latest."

At first when she told them about the note everyone was stunned. Then a babble of voices exploded as they all began talking at once. Charley tried twice to calm everyone down with no results so Dallas took charge.

"Everyone shut up!" His voice thundered through the din like a cannonball, startling them all. "Just...shut up."

The room silenced as quickly as if someone had turned down a volume knob. Dallas pushed himself up out of the chair. He was exhausted and in pain but enough

was enough. The sooner they got this over with the sooner they could leave. Everyone stared at him, but he got the silence he wanted. He nodded at Charley.

"You have the floor."

She let out a slow breath. "Okay. Let's recap what we know. Whoever the person is who's after Dallas, he's obviously figured out how to breach the perimeter and get past everyone. Otherwise he wouldn't have had access to the guitar case." She looked around the room. "That means band members and road crew as well. I have a feeling that little episode with the groupies yesterday might have been staged to distract everyone and give that person the chance to leave the note. It's common knowledge among the band and roadies that once Dallas takes his guitar out of the case he has it with him until the concert's over. Another reason it has to be someone inside the circle."

"What if he'd used the cloth after the show?" Mike asked. "He'd have found it then."

"I'm guessing it didn't matter. By then whoever planted it wouldn't be anywhere near the case. That was all that mattered."

Chase frowned. "But why give him a warning like this?"

She shrugged. "Maybe to shake him up. Let him know that despite all the security he wasn't that safe. I've seen it before. So let's see what we need to do to prove him wrong."

Chase cleared his throat. "Charley, if you want to replace me and my team, I'll understand." He had a miserable expression on his face. "Backstage was my responsibility."

"No one's replacing anyone," Dallas said. "Let's just give Charley a chance to say something so we can take care of this problem."

Sawyer Black set his coffee cup down very carefully. "Ms. Roper. I went with Morgan's arrangements on this because I myself knew your reputation. But either you've lost your edge or you never were that good. So which is it?"

"Neither." Morgan jumped in. "I think all of us have a tendency to protect our own, but who else can get close enough to do something like this? That means we need to give Charley free rein even if someone's feathers get ruffled." He looked at the manager. "We have a contract with Roper Protective Services. It's still in force and it's staying that way, and we're not going to get in the way of them doing their job."

Dallas limped over to Charley and draped an arm casually over her shoulder, a silent signal to everyone in the room that this was more than just a business arrangement now. That he was confident putting his life in her hands and anyone who had a problem with it could get the hell out of there. He was very conscious of the curious glances that snaked their way, but no one seemed really surprised.

And why should they? Her taking over the night shift had to be some kind of signal.

"Don't let your balls do your thinking for you," Sawyer said, setting down his coffee cup. "It's your life we're talking about here. Whoever this is, they're obviously escalating. You need the best money can buy. I'm wondering if Roper is it."

"My life, my call." Dallas wanted to smack his manager. He knew the man was concerned for his welfare but nothing was going to derail this thing with Charley now that they were getting it back on track. "Charley's in charge. We go from there."

"I'll be the first to admit the situation has changed," she agreed. "The shooting episodes could have been anyone. But now that things are happening closer to home we need to change up our plans. So here's the drill. We're changing up the security situation. Tightening things up. Chase, you'll have a complete list of all personnel wherever we have a show, including facility security. You and your men check everyone in and out, at both sound check and the concert. And let's double the scrutiny of the equipment to make sure nothing gets hidden in there again. Make sure the equipment gets where it's going without a problem. I suppose it's remotely possible this person could send Dallas a message by blowing up the truck or something, since he's probably frustrated all his efforts have failed so far. But I don't think that's where the real danger is."

"Then why send anyone with us at all?" Todd grumbled. "I don't need a babysitter. I've been doing this since Dallas got his first real gig."

"If you keep putting up a fuss," Dallas said, "I might start to think you're the one behind all this."

A dark red flush suffused Todd's face and Dallas knew his remark had hit home. The road manager might be a hedgehog where personality was concerned but he hated having his loyalty questioned.

"Let me remind you again, Dallas, I've been with you since your first real gig. Since the night I hauled you out of that ratty tavern I'd found my way into. You ought to know me better by now."

"Then quit bitching about everything." Dallas leaned back again and closed his eyes.

"Just think of this as backup, okay?" She turned to Sawyer. "What's your schedule when you leave here?"

"I have things to take care of." His eyes glittered at her like two cannons ready to fire. "Just like here at Fort Worth. Meet with the distributor, the promoter, whoever else is on my list. If you've been doing as many of these as you say, you should know what a manager's responsibilities are."

"Just shut up, Sawyer," Dallas said without looking at the man. "Someone might try to get to me through you. We're just trying to save your ugly hide."

"I understand that," he barked, "and I can promise you, nobody will be after me."

Charley's smile was forced. "Sawyer, if you just give me a copy of your schedule we'll work something out."

"Fine." He got up to refill his coffee cup. "I'll send it to your BlackBerry. That satisfy you?"

"That'll be good." She looked around at everyone again. "We'll all be on the same plane this time, so please plan to be ready to leave the hotel at noon."

"I always take a commercial flight," Sawyer told her. "I can't wait around places while you shuffle people around."

"I'll have a car for you when we land," she told him. "You can take off and do whatever you have to do. I really would appreciate it, though, if you'd let one of my men drive you."

"Just give it up, Sawyer," Dallas said. He was getting sick of all this muscle flexing. He was the one, after all, who was the source of the money and he could shut it all down tomorrow if he walked away. His manager had to be smart enough to know that.

"Fine. Okay. Whatever."

Charley spent the next twenty minutes going over the rest of the details with everyone. Todd and Chase huddled over the road schedule for the equipment and the crew. Mike now took over supervision of the band, although he'd be driving Dallas, Morgan and Charley to the airport.

"I need to roust out the crew," Todd said when they were finished. "Make sure the equipment's properly packed for travel."

"Fine. Chase and one of his men will go with you to make sure nothing else was tampered with."

For a long moment it looked as if Todd was going to give her an argument and Dallas was ready to speak up again. But then the road manager just shrugged.

"Whatever. Let's get moving."

Chase already had his cell phone out calling for someone as they moved toward the door.

Finally only Morgan was left.

"I have calls to make to the office," Charley said, "and other things to do before we leave. Did I forget something?"

"Yeah." He helped himself to more coffee, then looked from Dallas to Charley and back to Dallas again. "You forgot to tell me if things are still okay between the two of you."

Apparently treading softly around the situation didn't apply to him, but it probably shouldn't. He was the man in the middle, the one who'd shouldered it all, and he deserved the truth at all times.

"Just to clear the air," Dallas said, "Charley and I are...putting the pieces back together. That's all we have to say at the moment."

"I just wanted to make sure things are really good between the two of you. Nobody in the world would be happier about that but the last couple of days have been a real roller coaster for all of us. I'm just checking that everything is really good."

"They're really good," Dallas said.

"We've settled some of our...issues," Charley told him. "Right now I'm just pissed at myself for what happened. Trying to figure what we did wrong."

"Nothing," Dallas said. "We've obviously got a fox in the hen house and I know you'll find him out."

"Just checking," Morgan told him. "I just want you both to know I'm here for you."

Dallas had to swallow around the sudden lump in his throat. "I think we both know that, bro. Thanks." He held out his other hand. "I guess I owe you thanks again."

Morgan took his hand and shook it. "That's what family does. Let's not forget that."

Dallas' body tensed for a moment then relaxed. "Believe me. I won't forget it again."

"All right. I'll let you two get your act together. I'll see you downstairs. Dallas, I suspect you'll need those heat packs when we get to Atlanta."

"Yeah. When we get settled."

"I'm ordering dinner in our suite tonight," Charley said. "Would you like to join us? It's probably the last calm before the storm tomorrow."

He nodded. "Thanks. Okay. See you in a bit."

As soon as they were alone Charley insisted Dallas lie down again. "Rest. I'm going to call the pilot and check on some other things."

"You know, you have every right to rag on me for making our situation clear to everyone without asking you first," he told her. "I've been waiting for the explosion but you haven't said a word."

She smiled at him and his insides melted. "You did kind of throw it in everyone's faces. But that's okay. It's been kind of an open secret anyway after last night."

"I just want everyone to know what's going on. Besides, don't you think we're too old to be sneaking around?"

"I suppose." She brushed a lock of hair back from his forehead. "Besides, I realized that if I tried to pretend nothing was happening it would distract me from what I was hired to do. If I'm always worried about someone seeing us together it makes my job that much more difficult."

He reached for her hand and threaded his fingers with hers. "So what's next on the agenda for today?"

"We changed the hotel in Atlanta and no one will know where we're going until we actually get there."

Dallas frowned. "Sawyer's going to bitch again. He likes the perks we get at the places we stay."

"Sawyer will be a lot happier as long as you're alive. You're his meal ticket. I also switched which planes everyone is flying out on. We've had guards at the airfield all

night but I never take chances. And I texted my secretary and the forensic accountant I hired and I should be getting more reports today."

He squeezed her hand, loving the smooth feel of it. "Thank you. For everything."

Her eyes softened. "No problem. Got to take care of the client." She grinned. "And this one gets special care."

"What time are we taking off?"

"Give me a minute and I'll let you know." She unhooked her BlackBerry from her waistband and punched in a number, talked for a moment to the voice on the other end. "All set," she told Dallas when she hung up. "Plane takes off around one. Flying time's a little over two hours. I need to coordinate with Chase and Mike and make sure everyone's travel is taken care of and lock down the arrangements on the other end. We should pack and be ready for transport to the airfield. You rest your leg. I'll notify everyone, pack my stuff and then get yours."

"I can pack for myself," he protested.

She bent over and gave him a soft kiss. "Just relax and be waited on, cowboy. It won't happen every day."

Dallas watched her through the door, wondering if he'd ever get tired of looking at her.

Then he wondered if he'd still be alive tomorrow to enjoy it.

Chapter Thirteen

I called both my office and Lynette Touhey to get updates.

"You were right about the prints," Jacquie told me. "Too smeared to get a read, even with our new software."

"Dandy." I repeated Dallas' comment.

"I've got a little bit more for you on the band, Todd Mullins and Sawyer Black, but I'm telling you, either these people have no life or they're good at covering it up."

"Nothing? Come on."

"Only what you'd expect from musicians on the road. Booze, women and a few fights. Period."

Shit.

"Okay. Send it to my netbook along with anything you found on Randy Mueller." I'd print it out to read on the plane.

Lynette's voice mail picked up so I left her a message. I'd try her again when we got to Atlanta. I also texted Chase to be sure someone had eyes on Randy at all times. Dallas could defend him all he wanted but I wasn't ready yet to give him a pass.

By twelve thirty we were packed and downstairs. Chase left with the road crew and the equipment. Mike and his team loaded the band into two SUVs and now it was our turn. I noticed Sawyer grumbling but heaving himself into the shotgun seat. Morgan took the third row in the vehicle and Dallas and I sat in the middle.

And finally we were off. I'd gone over everything with Mike and Chase one more time, everyone was accounted for and the guards at the airport had reported no unusual activity around the planes. I just wished I didn't have this terrible feeling of dread coiling in my stomach.

We boarded the plane with little fuss, but the byplay between Sawyer Black and Dallas was interesting.

"Come on in the back with me." He indicated two facing seats in the rear of the cabin. "We can talk."

"There's nothing to talk about that we can't discuss with Morgan and Charley." Dallas sat deliberately on the couch in the front, tugging me down beside him.

Black smiled but I had the feeling there wasn't a lot of sincerity in it. He'd been top dog in this show for many years. Not once, but twice. And the first time around apparently Dallas didn't go to the bathroom without telling Sawyer first. It was hard to share that kind of control, so I was willing to cut the man some slack.

But I didn't have to like him.

"Fine." He kept the smile in place. "All right. Whatever you want. I just want to get things back on track here. We've got a good thing going."

Dallas had a death grip on my hand. When he looked at Sawyer his eyes had a shuttered look to them.

"All this touring was your idea. I just wanted to record. Remember? All I asked for was a contract with a label. You were the one who pushed for all of this."

"And look at what your sales are," Sawyer reminded him. "Not just CDs but a shitload of other merchandise."

"You're right, but personally I'm getting sick to death of this. I'm not a kid anymore. And all these attempts to kill me? It might just be time for me to hang it up, stay at the ranch and do just what I set out to do after the accident. Write music and record it."

"See? That's exactly what I'm trying to prevent. You know your safety comes first with me. But we'll catch whoever this is and life goes on."

"And I'm saying I might want to change how that happens."

I could feel the tension rising in the cabin.

"Let's put this on hold," I said to both men. "All right? Everyone needs to buckle in so we can take off."

Sawyer took one last long look at Dallas, nodded and moved to the back of the cabin.

I had insisted Dallas take the couch so he could stretch out his leg. After we were airborne, I'd get some of the pillows from the storage cupboard and prop them under his leg. I checked to make sure my agents and all the band members were secured in their seats, then took the seat opposite the couch, buckled in and closed my eyes. Every nerve in my body was screaming with stress. I was taken with an insane desire to grab Dallas as soon as the plane landed and run away somewhere. Anywhere. The destination wasn't important as long as we could be alone and away from all this craziness.

By the time we leveled off I was calm enough to take care of business. I got the pillows for Dallas, who grudgingly let me fuss over him. Then the cabin steward served lunch to everyone and I pulled from my briefcase the sheets of paper I'd printed out just before we left.

"A few warning flags," Jacquie had written. I knew she'd compiled all the research herself and was passing along what my staff had marked for extra attention. *"It could be any of these people or none of them. April is locked up with all her computers running down every fan who ever sent Dallas a letter and any female who ever crawled into bed with him."* She'd added an emoticon funny face. *"The list seems endless."*

A tiny ribbon of something flipped back and forth in my stomach. Women. I thought again about Dallas' insistence that he hadn't been with anyone for three years. As farfetched as it seemed, I really believed him. And it gave me a certain sense

of...possession. Still, I swallowed past a tightness in my throat wondering about all of them. Who they were. What they'd been like. How he'd felt about them.

Stop! That's a no-win trip. The past is the past. Leave it there.

I forced myself to look at the page again.

"We're still trying to get an identification on the prints you sent us but so far no luck. If he doesn't have a criminal record and his driver's license isn't in Texas we may have to search every database to find him. Or her. But she says she'll have something by tomorrow at the latest. And you know our April. She's always as good as her word."

That she was. I'd stolen her away from Hillcroft because her computer skills were unmatched and given her a kind of freedom she'd never had within the corporate structure. April was a real dichotomy—a free spirit with incredible technical talents. I did my best to keep her happy. She could search multiple databases, trace phone calls and zero in on GPS locations, all while sipping on a thirty-two-ounce high-octane soda. I'd given her every electronic tool she needed and she always came through for me.

I didn't ask where she'd gotten the names of Dallas' women or any of the other lists she was running. Sometimes with April, it was best not to know.

I turned back to the report.

"Deacon Young has some serious domestic issues. His wives have him constantly in court for child support. Neither of them had a good word to say about him, but we can't see where killing Dallas would help him. He needs the money he makes. The band members all get a cut of the record sales in addition to their salaries, and bonuses at the end of each tour."

"You're not eating."

Dallas' voice broke into my concentration. I turned my head to see that he'd finished his sandwich and was sitting up on the couch, watching me.

"Shouldn't you be lying down?" I asked.

"Been there, done that," he assured me. "I'm good until we get to the hotel. Then I'll soak in the tub and lie down with hot packs. Meanwhile, you eat your lunch."

I couldn't imagine what kind of pain he dealt with on a regular basis, especially giving concerts that lasted two hours. I recalled the way he'd maneuvered us in bed the night before so he was on his back with no weight on his legs, and how grateful he'd been to sit down in the shower this morning. Maybe it really was time for him to get out of the rat race. But that was a topic for later, when we didn't have an audience.

Dutifully I picked up one half of my sandwich and took a bite. I didn't have much of an appetite but there was no sense making an issue of it.

"Office stuff?" He nodded at the papers in my hand.

"Just things I have my staff checking on for me. Background information. Anything that will give us some kind of clue as to who's doing this. And why."

He tilted his head. "You've got quite a setup there, Morgan tells me."

I shrugged. "I have what I need. I saved most of my salary during the ten years at Hillcroft, so I had a good cushion when I went out on my own and I could hire the people I needed."

He was silent for a long moment, his gaze fixed on me. "You've done really well, Charley. But I always knew you'd be a success. I should have paid more attention to my brain years ago."

"Dallas..."

"It's okay. Just commenting. Go ahead with your work. I might doze a little."

As tightly strung as he was at the moment I didn't think that was possible, but he stretched back out on the couch and pulled his ball cap down over his face. I looked around the cabin. Some of the band members were sleeping, others were reading. Two of them had the ear buds from iPods plugged in. One of the rhythm guitar players had his instrument out and was idly picking at it.

Sawyer was still in his seat at the back, briefcase open, scribbling on a yellow pad of paper. I'd have given anything to be able to walk over there and get a look at what he was doing.

I shifted my gaze to Morgan, who was working on the little netbook he always carried with him.

"It's how I keep up with the ranch," he told me. "My foreman sends me reports every day. It also allows me to tap into the financials on Dallas."

"I love mine. That's for sure."

I turned back to the papers in my hand. The next page made me frown.

"There's something funny about Todd Mullins' wife and child. Rick sent someone to Benton Springs to talk to them but there was no one there. The neighbors don't know a thing except they've never seen a child and the wife is gone a lot."

The place inside me where my gut instinct lived began to itch, a sure sign that something was hinky. I just couldn't figure out what. Did Todd not have a child? What possible reason could there be for creating a phantom? And how would that play into this situation? He'd been with Dallas all these years. Surely if something was off-key Dallas would know about it. I made a mental note to ask him about it later.

"Rick said someone's on this and we'll find out whatever we need to know. Call me after you land and get checked into the hotel. Also more about Sawyer Black. Rick says he's checking something but he won't say yet what it is."

Sawyer Black. Wouldn't I just love to pin something on him but I still couldn't find a motive. Besides, he'd been in the trailer with us when the shot was taken at the concert and in New York at a dinner when the truck had been shot at. Of course he could hire someone but a stranger around the group would be a red flag.

The early notes had indicated the band and road crew were all in Texas at the time so realistically it could have been anyone of them. Great. No suspects or an abundance of them.

The last item was on Randy Mueller.

"Rick says the guy is bad news. He was in the truck when Dallas rolled it, and five surgeries couldn't make his hand work enough to play guitar again. All his medical bills were paid and Dallas made sure Sawyer Black got roadie gigs for the man. According to sources, he began to drink heavily and nearly got fired several times. His wife left him and he lost his house to foreclosure. Sawyer apparently straightened him out so he could work. When Dallas began to tour again he insisted Randy be part of the crew. But apparently he still hangs out in country bars when he's not working and badmouths Dallas any chance he gets. Tells anyone who'll listen the man ruined his life. More to come, I'm sure."

Randy Mueller was a bad apple but was he really a killer? Except for the lighting truss incident he'd been pretty invisible since we came on board with the tour, but the whole thing could be an act. In my experience simmering anger often was the most dangerous kind.

A lot of loose threads were still twisting in the wind, and I had to be careful not to pull the wrong one. Jump on someone just because I didn't like them. That was too easy to do. In my early years with the FBI, that had happened a couple of times. A very expensive lesson learned the hard way.

We had a lot of work to do yet and I still needed to talk to Lynette Touhey. Swallowing a sigh, I shoved the papers back into my briefcase and looked at my watch. Less than an hour before we landed. I forced myself to finish my lunch then powered up my netbook to check my emails.

One from Lynette, speak of the devil.

"Will call you later today. Found some interesting things and trying to follow them."

From Jacquie...

"Look for more emails today." And an additional note that she was sending updates about other contracts we had going at the moment. *"Nothing big. Just keeping you in the loop."* What would I ever do without her? Sometimes I wondered which of us was really in charge.

From Chase...

"Everything on target with equipment and road crew. Update later."

I shut down the little laptop, stashed it in my tote and leaned back in my seat. I didn't realize I had dozed off until Morgan reached over and touched my hand, startling me awake.

"We're getting ready to land, Charley."

I blinked, trying to shake the sleep from my eyes. Well, I'd hardly had any rest the night before and my body must have been complaining.

"Okay. I'm good."

I looked at Dallas, who was sitting up on the couch now. He gave me one of his long, slow smiles and a warm feeling seeped through me. Three days ago I'd still been

ready to roast his balls if I ever saw him again. Now I was clinging hopefully to the possibility of a future. Funny how things turned upside down so quickly.

Chase and Mike were first out of the plane as soon as the door opened and the stairs lowered.

"Let's wait until we get the all clear," I told everyone else, raising my voice enough to be heard.

There was some grumbling as Sawyer and the band members moved forward to deplane but Dallas just stared at them and everyone kept their thoughts to themselves. Finally the little radio on my belt crackled to life with Mike's voice giving me the all clear, and I began herding people onto the tarmac. I insisted Dallas wait with me until everyone else had climbed down the stairway.

Mike was waiting for us beside the ever-present black SUV. I knew behind his sunglasses he was scanning the area, hand resting on the grip of his pistol, until we were all loaded and on the way. The other vehicles carrying the musicians and Sawyer were already pulling away and I stared after them. Someone close to Dallas was a killer. I felt it.

Was it one of these people?

Chapter Fourteen

Dallas swallowed a smile when they walked into the suite and he glanced around. He knew Charley was controlling the arrangements, so she had to be the one who'd asked for a suite with only one bedroom. He wondered for a fleeting moment how she'd handled that with her team, then wiped it from his mind. Charley was a grown woman – and then some – and could more than handle herself.

He loved watching her work. She'd been such a kid when she'd talked about her FBI dreams. He imagined she'd been a crack agent, and she'd certainly honed her skills since then. She did her job with a quiet authority that impressed the hell out of him.

He waited while she did her usual walk-through of the suite before heading to the bathroom and the Jacuzzi tub. He knew she ordered a suite that had one in it because of his leg and he was more grateful than he could tell her for doing it quietly and not making an issue out of it.

As soon as the water was hot enough, he stripped off his clothes, lowered himself into the tub and turned on the jets. The moment the water began pulsing against his leg, he could feel the ache start to ease. Leaning his head back against the tub surround, he closed his eyes and let the heat do its work.

He was definitely getting too old and too battered for this. And his leg was bothering him more with each performance. Some nights it was all he could do to make the moves he needed. He had a prescription for pain meds if he needed it, but he'd been clean for three years of any drugs except the ones they'd given him for the surgeries. He planned to stay that way. Morgan could explain all he wanted that this was different, but drugs were drugs and Dallas wasn't about to fall down that long slide again. Besides, he'd known too many people who'd gotten hooked on prescription drugs. Nope. Wasn't happening.

Charley hadn't really asked him much about the years between then and now. He was sure she'd read all the newspaper articles before she took on this gig. And of course there was enough ink on the accident to drown a pond of fish. Much as he wanted to bury it all, he knew if they were to move forward with a really clean slate, he had to get it all out in the open. At the appropriate time. Whenever that happened to be.

He wished to hell he hadn't let Sawyer talk him into this grind again. It seemed, though, as if the minute he said yes the thing just snowballed. One more concert. One more tour. But until a few days ago he hadn't really had anything driving him to finally hang it up.

Then Charley came back into his life. If he could win her heart again, make a life with her, he could get off the road and do something approaching normal. Maybe he could convince her to build a house at the ranch, far enough from Morgan's to give

them privacy. He had the money now to build the recording studio too. When Charley had to go on the road herself with a client, he could write and record and work the ranch with Morgan. If there was still a place for him there.

Of course there will be. You're my brother, right?

He could hear Morgan's voice in his head. Somehow, since the accident, all the years of estrangement and bitterness had disappeared and they were closer than they'd ever been. He didn't know if he could ever tell Morgan how grateful he was that he'd shown up in the hospital that day. Now maybe he could pick up his share of the work.

Whoa! Let's not get carried away.

Charley hadn't even said the words yet. They'd had great—make that stupendous—sex but she hadn't said the words he wanted to hear. She hadn't chewed his ass out for signaling everyone that something was happening between them, and she'd reserved a suite with one bedroom instead of two. But they still had a long way to go to get to the "let's make it permanent" point.

He was so lost in thought he didn't hear movement in the room, and jumped when a soft hand stroked his forehead and slim fingers sifted through his hair.

"Sorry." Charley perched on the edge of the tub. "I didn't mean to startle you. I'm finished with my calls for a while so I thought I'd check on you. You doing okay?"

He smiled at her. "I'd be doing a lot better if you climbed in here with me."

She laughed, a soft, smoky sound. "Not right now. But it's tempting."

He reached over to take one of her hands, rubbing his finger across the knuckles. "Sit here with me awhile, okay?"

From the corner of his eye he could see she'd caught her plump lower lip between her teeth, worrying it. "Sure."

He tugged on her hand. "Much as I'd really like to think you couldn't be away from me for one minute more, you've got that bottom lip between your teeth. You always chomp on your lip when you've got something on your mind. Let's have it."

"You have to know that one of the things I'm doing is a complete background check on everyone tied to you. Sawyer. Todd. The roadies. The band."

"So? Even though I can assure you it's none of them, I'd be surprised if you didn't do it. Part of the job. So what's wrong? Someone got their hand in the cookie jar?"

She slipped her hand from his and used it to tilt his chin up, forcing him to look directly at her. "I don't know yet. And no matter what you say, we can't rule out anyone yet. The incident with the lighting, especially, tells me it's either someone close to you or someone who can find a way to blend in. For example, people can hold grudges for a long time."

"And? What's your point?"

"I'm still concerned about Randy Mueller." She held up a hand. "I know you say he's not the problem, and maybe I'm just grasping at the obvious, but the report I got says he's still vocal about blaming you for what happened to him."

"That's his outlet, Charley. He's had plenty of time to hurt me if he wanted to."

"Maybe he's just working up to it. I don't know. What I *do* know is it has to be someone in your immediate group, so maybe you can pick out another candidate."

"Not right now." He leaned his head back. "Right now I just want to forget everyone but you and me. Plenty of time to worry when I get out of the tub."

"I just want to keep you alive," she said. "Now that we're together again I don't want someone killing you."

The heat Dallas felt wasn't just from the water.

"And are we, Charley? Together again?"

"I'd say so." She sighed. "It doesn't do me any good to fight it or deny it."

She stroked her fingers across his chin, down his neck and onto the tiny ridge of shoulder peeking out from the bubbling water. Tiny ripples raced over his muscles at the electricity of her touch. He'd thought at twenty-three the heat between them was over the top, but this... One touch from her and he was ready to go off like a rocket. Why didn't the damn water coax his over-achieving cock to lie down?

"Can I ask you something else?"

"Go ahead." He looked at her hard. "You can ask me anything you want, Charley. I'll never lie to you. I might have acted like a shithead but I'll never, ever lie to you about anything."

What now? Oh well, Creed, if you want to get on with this, tell her whatever she wants to know.

"Why did you decide to go on the road again? Was the jazz you get from it really so important?"

That was a surprise. Not at all what he was expecting. He reached for her hand again and held it against his chest.

"Careful," she laughed, bracing herself on the tile around the tub. "You'll pull me in."

He grinned at her. "Would that be such a bad idea?"

"I told you. Not right now. Please?"

"All right, all right," he grumbled. Visions of her naked body sliding through the water to straddle his hips made him suddenly hard enough to punch holes in wood. He was glad the surface of the water was all froth and bubbles.

"Going on the road." He closed his eyes, remembering the meeting with Sawyer after three painful years. "It wasn't what I had in mind at all. First of all, for two years I was so fucked up I could hardly leave the ranch. I had seven surgeries in all. I was either preparing for one or recovering from one. Sometimes I wonder how Morgan put up with it all and still managed to run the ranch."

"I'm glad he was there for you." Her voice was soft and soothing, and some of the tension slid away.

"Yeah, me too. He saved my ass for sure."

"So, when did you start writing music again?"

"A little in between the last two surgeries. Before that I was too busy fighting pain, getting clean and kicking myself in the ass." He gave her a lopsided smile. "Which is really hard to do with only one functioning leg."

And there was that soft, smoky laugh again. "The mental images defy description."

"I'll bet. Anyway, I finally had my head together enough to start tinkering with songs again, writing, working on some of the old stuff. What I really wanted to do was record and promote the CDs. Maybe build a recording studio on the ranch. It's big enough and Morgan was good with the idea."

"So what happened?"

"I called Sawyer." He reached for the master control and turned up the force of the jets a little more, then bent his left leg so one stream pulsed directly on the knee. "Morgan pitched a fit. Rehashed everything that had happened with the guy at the time of the accident. Told me I didn't need him. I could do it on my own. *We* could do it together."

"So why didn't you?"

Yes, really, why hadn't he? Life would be so much simpler now. But he'd fallen for the asshole's bullshit again.

"He had the easy connections. I thought he could just take a demo of the new stuff and go to my old label. Hell, the CDs were all still selling great. Maybe even better than before. Morgan had decided to check with the label directly after the financial disaster we'd already been through."

Charley stared at him. "Really? Went to the record people himself? Sawyer couldn't have been too happy about that."

Dallas grunted. "Let's just say we all had a heated discussion. But here's the thing. When I got wrecked, Sawyer tore up the contract between us. Figured I was as good as dead and he wasn't far from right. But after I got my head straight again I realized the record label would still have royalties from CD sales. That's when Morgan got a crash course in the business."

"About?"

"About who gets the royalties and how. Talked to a lawyer first. Told me he wanted to make sure, since Sawyer Black took himself out of the picture, he wasn't getting his hands on any money after that date." Dallas laughed without humor. "That money took care of medical expenses for two years and let me pay my way with the ranch."

Charley cocked her head. "But the ranch is half yours."

Dallas shook his head. "Maybe on paper, but Morgan ran it for twenty years then rearranged his life to help me when it all fell apart. I owed him. Big time. I still do."

"What did Sawyer say about the royalties? I can't believe he didn't have his fingers in that pie."

"There wasn't much he could say. When Morgan figured out my situation he called the label the minute I killed the contract with Sawyer. Hired a crack entertainment attorney and had him send a letter telling them they'd be held responsible if they released the money to anyone but Morgan or me."

And hadn't *that* been a lot of fun. Sawyer had shown up at the ranch and done his best to tear Morgan a new one. But Morgan held his ground.

"Then why did you call Sawyer when you wanted to record again? How could you trust him?"

"Morgan asked the same thing. Only fight we'd had since he'd walked into my hospital room. He still thinks Sawyer helped himself to money he shouldn't."

"And? Did he?"

"I may yet be proved wrong but while Sawyer Black is a lot of things I don't believe he's a crook. Thing is, he busted his balls for me the first time around. I'd never have gotten where I did without him. I figured I owed him too. And besides," he grinned, "I had Morgan watching things now. He's better than a Doberman."

Charley leaned a little closer, brushed a lock of hair from his forehead. "Go on."

He pushed at the surface of the water again to give himself something to do, distract himself from Charley's nearness. Every time he got a whiff of her light, spicy scent he wanted to drag her into the water and fuck her senseless.

"So," he continued. "The thing I had in mind was for Sawyer to just put the package together and I could write and record. Maybe do a special event once in a while to let people know I wasn't really dead. But he's such a snake oil salesman. He convinced me—over Morgan's arguments, I have to say—that it would be to everyone's advantage to go live again."

"So you did."

"So I did. Shocked the hell out of me, the reception I got. Sold-out concerts. CD sales through the roof. And somehow once I got back on the train again, I couldn't seem to find a way to get off. It's been wild."

"How long do you plan to keep it up? What kind of contract do you have with Sawyer?"

He chuckled. "One that Morgan took to the attorney before I signed it. Either one of us can terminate with sixty days' written notice. If there are still concert dates, they have to be played. And he still gets a cut of royalties and sales for anything conceived while I was under contract to him."

"But you know you don't need him now to get you to the top. You're already there. You're his meal ticket. He needs you more than you need him."

"So Morgan keeps pointing out to me. And maybe it's time to give it some serious thought. Do what I wanted to do in the first place." He tried to read her face. "How would you feel about that?"

"Me? What do I have to do with it?"

Dallas smiled. "Charley, you have to know you have a hell of a lot to do with it." He reached out and took her hand. "I want you with me forever, darlin'. And I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen."

I swallowed hard and pulled back both hands, curling my fingers in my lap.

"Are you really sure about that?"

"Surer than I've ever been of anything in my life."

"I thought we were sure all those years ago." I wished at once I could take back the words, but something inside made me push. Some part of me was still clinging to the past. What did I need from him to erase that? "I mean, we seem to be heading in a good direction here, but can we trust this? What if it all falls apart again? What's different now?"

I watched his face carefully for any sign that he was playing me but all I saw was a man hiding a world of pain with hope flickering in his eyes. Something shifted inside me, maybe the block of granite that had been lodged in my stomach for so many years, and the last wall began to crumble.

Dallas closed his eyes and tilted his head back, resting it against the back of the tub.

"Something happened to me when that truck rolled, Charley." His voice was low and gravelly, rough with the ache of unpleasant memories. "For a long time I wasn't even sure I'd walk again. And everyone who'd had a ride on my particular gravy train disappeared like smoke."

He shifted in the tub. I wondered if he should get out, if his leg had been in one position for too long. But I didn't want to interrupt his flow of thoughts.

"And I was tired, Charley. Just plain old tired." He rubbed his forehead. "Tired of the grind. Tired of the demands. And tired of the women who collectively didn't have more than one brain cell and only wanted the reflected glory of fucking a star. A star!" He snorted. "Jesus.

"And then I'd close my eyes at night, when the pain in my leg was so bad sometimes I couldn't think straight, and I'd see your face. I'd remember what it looked like just after we'd made love and it was flushed with passion. I'd think of your smile, the one that always lit up the room." He opened his eyes and looked at me. "And then I'd remember how you looked that last night. Angry, hurt, disappointed. And I wanted to wipe it all away and start over."

I realized suddenly Dallas had stopped talking and was looking at me, as if waiting for a comment of some kind.

"Dallas..." Could I do this? Make the commitment? Make it permanent?

"Come on, Charley. We've already taken that first step. I want to take all the rest with you."

I drew in a long breath and let it out slowly. He'd said the words to me already—I love you—but I had yet to say them back to him. I was sleeping with him. Having spectacular sex. Signaling to the world that we had something between us. Why couldn't I tell him what he wanted to hear?

"I think we're getting there," I said at last. "What do you think?"

"I think I need to get out of this tub right now and kiss you. So you keep thinking of that possibility."

He turned off the jets and flipped the lever on the plug with his toe, the water swirling down the drain. Grabbing the tub for support, he pushed himself up. As he stood there in the bright light of the bathroom, I got a really good look at his scars for the first time. Dozens of tiny white lines crisscrossed his leg, bisected in several places by longer, thicker scars, obviously from the surgeries. The muscles in the calf and thigh were slightly thicker than on the right leg, an indication I was sure of painful physical therapy. Hours of forced torture to make sure the leg didn't wither or become weak in any way.

I thought about the concerts he did, two grueling hours of playing that guitar, singing, moving his body to the beat. Moving around the stage. And I wondered where he found the inner strength to do it.

Backing away from the tub, I handed him one of the large, fluffy towels hanging on the heated towel rack. When he stepped out onto the bath mat I forced myself to look anywhere but at his leg. If he was going to have trouble with balance, I wanted to be able to help, but not at the risk of making him uncomfortable.

One more minefield to make my way through.

"It's okay, Charley." His whiskey voice broke into my thoughts.

"Excuse me?"

"If we go forward in any way with...this—whatever *this* is—we both have to accept the leg is part of my history and part of my body." One damp hand cupped my chin. "It's all right, darlin'. One thing at a time, right?"

"Right." My voice was a little unsteady because now I was looking at the entire body, in damn good shape for a man no longer a kid. Lean and fit except for the leg, and with a cock that seemed to be standing at attention.

Dallas looked down and grinned. "Seems to have a mind of its own, doesn't it?" He dropped the towel and reached for me, pulling me close.

"Uh, Dallas..."

"A kiss, Charley. Remember? I said I was getting out for a kiss."

Before I could take another step back, his arms were around me, his damp, naked body was pressed against mine, and those warm lips were assaulting my mouth and creating the most incredible sensations in my body. I slid my hands up his chest, feeling

the little drops of water clinging to the soft curls of his chest hair. My fingers searched for his nipples, scraping over them and drawing forth the growl of desire vibrating in his throat, a sound that I'd already learned aroused me as much as his touch.

He nipped my lower lip, a gentle bite, then soothed it with his tongue. I flicked my own tongue out to touch the tip of his. That was all the invitation he needed to plunge inside and sweep through the hot cavern of my mouth. I trembled, so aroused just by the power of the kiss that the muscles in my cunt began to flutter in tiny spasms.

God, what was I turning into? I had work to do. Things to take care of. Yet all I could think about was getting as naked as Dallas and feeling him inside me. I tunneled my fingers through his hair, drinking from his mouth as voraciously as he was from mine.

"I thought you had stuff to do," he rasped when we broke the kiss. His breathing was just as uneven as mine, his skin heated despite the water still dampening it.

"Stuff?" I lifted heavy eyelids to see desire smoldering in his eyes. "Oh yeah, stuff."

But then I kissed him again, tasted him, and nothing else mattered.

We literally tore my clothes off, dropping them along the way as we moved into the bedroom, our mouths still fused together. Dallas yanked the covers back and we tumbled onto the bed together.

There was nothing gentle about it this time, nothing soft or seductive. This was raw need at its most primal, carnal passion that was consuming us in a giant flame. I didn't recall ever feeling this terrible urgency before, even when we'd been younger and it seemed we were always in a scorching hurry.

"Inside me," I gasped, widening my legs to give him access.

"I'm there, I'm there." His drawl had thickened like molasses as the need in him rose higher and gripped him.

He bent my legs back until my knees touched my chest, inhaled a deep breath and plunged inside me. The shock of the intrusion stabbed everywhere as my tissues struggled to adjust to his size, his girth.

"Breathe, Charley," he murmured as he held himself still.

My muscles clenched and I knew my liquid surrounded the swollen length of his shaft. I opened my eyes to find his looking straight into mine, everything he felt so plainly visible that my heart clenched.

And then he began to move, slowly at first, but the desire was too strong for an easy pace, too hot for patience and finesse. He rolled his hips and slammed into me, again and again. Harder, faster, more powerfully. I could feel every slide of his cock against my tissues, every hard thrust as the tip of his erection touched the mouth of my womb. I was so aroused by the pure animalistic need that I didn't need any other stimulation from him.

We crashed together, falling into a pit of flame that threatened to devour us both, burning us from the inside out. Spasms racked me and I shuddered from head to toe,

again and again. I heard someone screaming and realized it was me, my voice a counterpoint to Dallas shouting my name. His cock flexed as his release flooded me.

And then we collapsed, every bit of our energy spent. I felt the weight of Dallas' body on mine but instead of trying to shift him I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him close. I wanted the feel of his sweat-slickened skin against mine, a thudding of his heart echoing through me. The only sound in the room was the raw gasping as we dragged air into our lungs.

Dallas was the first to move, pushing himself up onto his forearms, drifting his lips across my cheek, down my jawline and back up to my mouth.

"Charley." Just the one word, breathed with a sound of satisfied exhaustion.

I inhaled as deeply as I could and let my breath out slowly. I had to press my lips together to keep from blurting out the words that I wasn't yet ready to say.

Then he eased himself from my body and rolled off the bed.

"Shower," he said, tugging at my hand.

"I guess," I sighed, and let him pull me to my feet. Then I giggled. "You just got out of the tub."

"And worked up a sweat again," he reminded me with a smile.

If we hadn't both been so exhausted the sensation of soaping each other and gliding hands over each other's bodies might have started another session of hot, sweaty sex. But we were spent. I could see pain and fatigue in Dallas' eyes and I had things to take care of. So we rinsed off, dried each other and then pulled clothes out of our suitcases. I found jeans and a t-shirt, and slid my feet into thong sandals. Dallas just pulled on a pair of boxers and limped to the bed.

"Did Morgan give you the bag with the packs in them?" he asked as he stretched out on the sheet.

"Yes. And he told me what to do."

Dallas carried a full supply of instant hot packs, neoprene packets that heated as soon as you pulled a tab. I took out three, as Morgan had told me to do, and placed them along the length of the injured leg. I also managed to coax him to take two acetaminophen. Then I pulled the drapes to darken the room, covered him over and was straightening up to walk away when he grabbed my hand and tugged me down to him.

"You need to rest," I told him. *And I need to get my head together.*

"I am. Charley?"

"Yes?"

"I love you. And that's no bull. Just keep that in mind." Then he closed his eyes and his breathing evened out.

I had managed to convince myself that sex with Dallas was okay, that we could be some kind of couple, but love? I wasn't ready for that yet. Besides, I still wasn't sure if Dallas was just living in the past, making up for old sins, or really meant what he said.

And I couldn't take the time to explore it until I solved the present situation. My instincts were telling me that the killer was about to step up his plan and I still had too many unanswered questions. I closed the door to the bedroom and set up my netbook on the table in the living room, my mind and heart racing. I sure as hell hoped someone had come up with some answers for me.

Chapter Fifteen

Even before pulling up my emails, I checked my BlackBerry and saw a message from Lynette. A call I'd been waiting for, so I returned it at once.

"Please tell me you have something," I said. "Anything. I don't care how remote or absurd it is."

"Probably not the things you want to hear from me," she answered. "But I'm getting close."

"What have you got so far?"

"You'll be happy to know most of the band is clean. The road crew too."

"Even Randy Muller?" I interrupted.

"If he's anything but a bitter man who likes to shoot off his mouth I can't find it."

Damn.

"But you know my instincts," she went on. "Something here feels out of place so I'm pushing harder on it." She paused and I could hear the clicking of netbook keys. "I have a weird situation with Todd Mullins. Withdrawals without expenditures. Very large amounts." More clicking. "Then there's Sawyer Black."

"My favorite person." I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

Lynette chuckled. "I'm sure. Anyway. I have the opposite problem with him. The guy spends a shitload of money. Big-ticket items, but he pulls in a lot from Dallas. It's the cash I found in two offshore accounts that's the puzzler. I don't see where any of it came from appropriate sources. Spends some, invests some."

Again, I didn't want to know how Lynette accessed this information. When it was time to make a move legally, I'd ask one of the high-priced attorneys I kept on retainer what the best course of action was. Right now anything we found was the ever-popular fruit of the poisonous trees but at least it could point me in some direction.

"He can't be stealing from Dallas' income," I told her. "Morgan's like an eagle with the accounting. Even uses a separate firm. Every penny is scrupulously accounted for. And Dallas is his only client."

"All I can tell you, Charley, is the money in Aruba and the Caymans comes from somewhere. I'm still snooping around so I'll let you know what I come up with."

"The problem is none of this shows me a motive for any of them to kill Dallas," I pointed out. "He's the cash cow that feeds them all. In fact, Sawyer was the one who pressured him to go on tour again. Why would he do that and then try to kill him? It just doesn't make sense."

"The only thing I can tell you, Charley, is I've got that tickle in my stomach I get when something's out of place. I just need to find it. And I will. I promise you."

"All right." I tried not to let my disappointment show in my voice. I'd hoped for more and time was running out. "Keep in touch."

"I'm on it," she assured me, and disconnected the call.

Next I called the office, hoping maybe Rick or the others had some kernel of a lead for me.

"Talk to me," I told Rick when he came on the phone. "Please tell me you have something."

"A long list of Dallas Creed groupies," he laughed. "I think I'm in the wrong business."

"Ha ha. Just tell me what you've got."

"Nothing concrete yet," he admitted. "There are some irate females out there who didn't take too kindly to being dumped by your hero, but I personally don't think any of them have the brain cells to plan what you're dealing with."

"Maybe someone's husband?" I asked. "Or boyfriend? Some guy who didn't take too kindly to his lady getting it on with Dallas Creed?"

"That's really a reach, boss. I've been digging pretty hard, and I can't find even a shadow of evidence that Dallas has been with *any* female since the accident. The guy lives like a monk."

Dallas was telling me the truth. An unexpected wave of relief swept over me. I hadn't really thought he was handing me a line, but still... Anyway, it was good to have Rick confirm it.

"What I'm saying," Rick went on, "is that if the killer is somewhere in that crowd, it's a grudge that has to have been simmering all this time. And taking the measure of these folks? It's just damn unlikely."

I blew out a breath of frustration. "So we're still nowhere."

"Not what you wanted to hear, I know. But I'm still digging."

"I know. Just keep on truckin'. I'm glad there's no concert again until tomorrow night. I plan to keep Dallas locked up in the suite until tomorrow's sound check. At least I can make it tough for whoever this is to get to him."

I clicked off and sat back in my chair, feeling frustrated and dissatisfied. I was just scrolling through the rest of my messages when someone knocked on the door to the suite. I opened the door to a scowling Morgan with two newspapers gripped in his hand.

"Son of a bitch," he growled as he stormed into the suite.

"What?" I stepped aside so he wouldn't mow me down.

He dropped the newspapers onto the table where I was working and pulled a bottle of water from the minifridge. "Read 'em and weep. I left both papers turned to the appropriate pages."

Filled with curiosity, I picked up the first paper, folded to a column called *Star Tracks*. Bile rose up in my throat as I read the articles.

Today's Musings

What on earth is going on with our favorite country-rock icon, Dallas Creed? Star Tracks has learned that he's hired the very high-priced Roper Protective Services to throw a protective blanket around him. Charley Roper is as much a star in her business as Dallas is in his, so Star Tracks wants to know – what's going on? And has anyone besides this columnist discovered the highly attractive Ms. Roper used to be Dallas Creed's main squeeze? Hmm. Is there more cooking here than the famous man's safety? Is there a special reason now to keep the groupies away from him? Star Tracks thinks this bears further looking into.

"Well, we had to know this was coming," I said. "Dallas is very newsworthy and I'm something new for them to chew on."

I wasn't sure I was ready to go this public yet but even an idiot would have figured out my appearance would raise questions with the hungry press. I picked up the next newspaper and it was even worse.

On the Concert Trail

Is it just a coincidence that high-profile security specialist Charley Roper has been hired to beef up Dallas Creed's protection? Or has the big man decided to resurrect a long-lost love? This column has learned the parting between the pair twenty years ago was more than bitter. So what would bring the two of them together after all this time, an interval during which, as far as we can learn, there was no contact at all? What kind of threat could be so bad that Dallas Creed has put aside the past and pulled in what this reporter has learned is his former lover? One he hasn't seen for twenty years? And have they been able to bury the hatchet? Are things heating up again between them? Stay tuned.

"Damn." I tossed the paper aside. "Dallas predicted this would happen and I've been around hot stars long enough to know he's right."

"Hiring Roper Protective Services is easily explained," Morgan said. "You've worked for a lot of other music stars, so that alone doesn't really throw up any red flags. But bringing the personal issue into it colors everything. Speculation is a big part of how these people make their living. You don't need me to tell you that."

"What I want to know is how they found out about our personal history," I demanded. "It's more than twenty years in the past."

Morgan made a rude sound. "Are you kidding? These people have big shovels and they dig deep. They probably know what kind of grades Dallas got in school. Besides, since he took to the stage again a year ago he's been on the top of the hot news list for all entertainment reporters."

"Damn." I paced, chewing my bottom lip and wishing I could get my hands around the neck of every columnist in the country. I'd had plenty of reason to detest them on behalf of other clients, but this time it was personal. "And there's absolutely nothing we can do about it."

"You're right." Morgan drank half his water before recapping the bottle. "I suppose we could try to ignore it, but you know as well as I do that would only make them dig harder and speculate more. I'm sure you've seen it with other clients."

And wasn't that the truth? At least I wasn't trying to hide a married client's very indiscreet affair. It just felt so weird to be the person involved.

"Dallas will have his usual media frenzy tomorrow between the sound check and the concert. They'll expect him to address it. So will Sawyer."

"Shit." I smacked my forehead. "Sawyer. That ass. I can't wait to hear his take on this. Where is he, anyway? I know he's back from the trip to the local distributor. Chase told me he locked himself up in his room making calls. Maybe he hasn't seen the newspapers yet."

"That won't last too long," Morgan warned. "We'd better figure out what we want to do before he barges in here."

"All right." I nibbled on my lip. "All the rooms here are registered in the agency's name so if reporters try to call the hotel switchboard, they'll get nothing. That means we've got some time."

"We have to tell Dallas about this."

"I know, I know." I chewed my lip some more. "But he's sleeping right now. He spent some time in the hot tub and then I put the hot packs on his leg. I don't want to wake him just yet."

"No problem. It gives you and me some time to hash it over." He gave me a penetrating look. "Exactly how much are you comfortable with making public, Charley?"

My chuckle had no humor in it. "Does it matter? I think that ship has sailed."

"Then you need to figure out what you're willing to let out there, and have Dallas just drop it into his interviews."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. All right. Give me a little time to run through it in my mind. God, Morgan, I should have been smart enough to sidestep this but I don't seem to be hitting on all cylinders. That's why I switched roles with Mike. How am I supposed to do my job while dealing with this?"

"You'll figure it out, Charley." He gave me the trademark Creed grin. "You always do."

Figure it out. Right. First I had to get my brain on track again.

I turned when I heard the bedroom door open. Dallas wandered into the living room, slightly sleep-rumpled. He'd pulled on a pair of jeans and a Dallas Creed t-shirt, but no shoes and he looked with curiosity from Morgan to me.

"What's the deal? You both look like someone just died."

"Not funny," Morgan told him.

I jumped up from the table where I'd been sitting. "How's the leg? Feeling better?"

"Yeah, it is." He rubbed his thigh. "Still aches a little but we'll do the hot packs again later and I'll be good to go tomorrow." He looked at Morgan and then at me. "What's going on? Nobody's tried to kill me in the last few hours so it has to be something else. And it doesn't look good."

Morgan picked up the two newspapers and started to hand them to him.

I made a grab for them but Morgan shook his head.

"I thought I'd...you know...tell him first," I said.

"He's a big boy, Charley," Morgan reminded me. "When we started this tour thing together we agreed we'd never lie to each other or keep secrets. I don't intend to start now."

"You're right, you're right. We just need to figure out how to spin this."

"Will one of you for fuck's sake tell me what's going on here?" Dallas demanded.

I handed him the newspapers, still folded open to the appropriate pages.

Dallas took the big armchair so he could stretch his leg out on the ottoman and read the two columns. Somehow he kept his face completely expressionless. Finally he put both papers down and looked at me.

"Sawyer seen this yet?" he asked.

"I don't know." I shrugged. "Morgan hasn't heard from him about it and neither have I. He's holed up in his room so my guess is probably not. But he could at any time."

"Then the three of us will decide how we're going to handle this before he shows up and tries to throw his weight around. You know there'll be questions when I meet the media tomorrow. It's really up to you, Charley, what I tell them."

"Be forewarned," Morgan broke in, "that they won't let it go. You can't just flat-out deny it, not with the sappy look on his face my brother gets when he looks at you."

"Sappy?" Dallas lifted an eyebrow. "Don't you think I'm a little too old for sappy? Besides, I can control myself as much as I need to."

"That's beside the point. You've already given the band and the others signs that something's going on. You're sleeping in the same bed, for god's sake. It's time to decide how much you want to tell the public."

Dallas looked intently at me as if his gaze alone could draw answers from me. I did my best to avert my eyes from the obvious bulge in his jeans. Good lord! The man was

forty-three years old and getting as horny as a teenager every time he looked at me. Even in the middle of trouble. It was only a couple of hours ago that we'd had incredible, animalistic sex and yet here he was, lusting after me again.

Of course, truth to tell, I wasn't much better, my panties constantly damp with arousal and my nipples painfully hard. I wondered when our stamina would give out and hoped we didn't kill ourselves before then.

But that wasn't the real problem here. I knew how badly he wanted me to agree to shout to the world about our relationship. He'd made that very clear earlier. Was I ready to do that? I stared at him for a long time. He'd opened his heart and laid it bare. Now it was up to me. I drew in air as if I'd never taken a breath before and let it out very slowly.

I sat down on the ottoman by Dallas' legs, resting my hand on his knee.

He took my hand and squeezed it. "Charley, if you say you don't want to do this, I'll understand. But you've been doing your thing long enough to know they won't let it alone. I'm sorry these people put this out there for everyone to read, but I'm not sorry about letting people know about us. If you can be okay with that."

I couldn't help smiling at him. He was so damn earnest.

"You have to know this would be a very big step for me, Dallas."

"I know that, darlin'. And just so *you* know, this is not about saving my ugly face or any of that. I can handle whatever they throw at us. It's about letting people know that we have something real here. Something I'll never take for granted again. Something I want everyone to know about. That I'm proud of. So. What do you say? Can you do this?"

What the hell. I believed him or not. I was either in or out.

"All right," I said. "I guess we have only two choices here. Stop what's happening between us or go forward. And I really don't want to stop anything."

I could almost see every muscle in his body relax.

"How about if we spin it this way?" I went on. "Tell them we knew each other years ago. When you decided to beef up security for the tour you thought of me. As soon as we spent time together we reconnected, and we hope everyone will be kind enough to give us room to see what's happening with us. That sound okay to you?"

He grinned. "I should have you writing my press releases for me. I'm good with that."

I gave him a light kiss and stood up. "I'm good. Let's do this, Dallas. Maybe this time we can make it work."

Mike and Chase joined us, I ordered dinner for the five of us and we went over the routine for the next day. Mike and Chase had barely left before someone was banging on the door to the suite. When I opened it Sawyer charged in waving a clutch of newspapers, his irritation more than evident.

"Have you seen this garbage?" he ranted.

"Yes," I told him. "We're all aware of it. Would you like to sit down, Sawyer?"

"I'd like to know what the hell is going on here. What's really up between you two and why am I the last to find out?"

From the corner of one eye, I saw Dallas pushing himself up from the table where we'd all had dinner.

"We've been discussing this," I began.

"Without me?" he interrupted. "You talked about this without me?"

Yup, the man definitely had control issues.

"I tried calling you three times," Dallas told him in a deliberately calm voice. "If you kept your cell turned on or checked your messages you wouldn't be out of the loop."

Sawyer turned his anger on him. "You do nothing without me. Do you understand that, Dallas? I make all the decisions. No one else. Not even you."

The silence in the room as Dallas rose from his chair was like a thick blanket, almost smothering us.

"Sawyer." His voice was like frozen steel. "I think this is probably as good a time as any to get a few things straightened out, don't you?"

"Damn straight. Why don't you sit back down and we'll go over things." He looked at me. "Maybe Miss Fancy Pants could bring us some coffee."

I stole a look at Dallas. I had never seen such rage in his eyes. The soft, even tone of his voice should have been a dead giveaway to Sawyer that he'd crossed a line. I couldn't imagine they'd been together all this time and the manager didn't know his client any better than that.

"Charley's not a waitress. If you want coffee, get it yourself."

I saw him rub his thigh and not even realize he was doing it. That made me worry again about the leg.

"Sit down, Dallas." I touched his shoulder. "I'll get the coffee. It's all right. I think we could all use some."

"Charley, you don't—"

"It's okay," I repeated. "Just sit. This has been simmering since San Antonio. Let's get it all out there and see where everyone stands."

A muscle twitched in Dallas' cheek and tension lined every inch of his body, but he slowly lowered himself back into his chair. I brought the coffee carafe from the credenza, along with an extra cup, and poured for all of us. Then I sat down next to Dallas again and reached for his hand, lacing my fingers through his. If we were going public in a big way, a little handholding in front of Sawyer was no big deal. I was more afraid he'd pop a blood vessel if he didn't get his anger under control.

"You're right," Sawyer said, setting his cup down very carefully. "We definitely have things to take care of."

Dallas studied the man for a long moment before he spoke. "The first thing, I guess, is to tell you that when this tour is over so am I. No more concerts. Period."

Sawyer's eyes bulged. "Are you out of your mind?"

"And the second thing," Dallas went on as if the man hadn't spoken, "is to let you know that tomorrow Morgan's contacting our attorney to serve you with our sixty-day notice to terminate our contract."

Sawyer's face turned so red, his eyes bulged so much I was afraid he was going to have a stroke. He swallowed twice before he spoke again.

"You are just shitting me. This is some kind of joke, right?"

"Not at all." Dallas was definitely in his don't-fuck-with-me mode. "I'm dead-on serious."

"This is her fault." Sawyer pointed a finger at me. "Her idea."

Dallas shook his head. "No, it isn't. I never should have agreed to go on the road again in the first place. Now I'm done. You can hang around for the rest of the tour or pack it in now." He shrugged. "I don't much care."

"This is a big mistake," Sawyer said at last. "You can't handle the rest of the tour yourself."

"I think we can," Morgan said. "I've been around enough now to handle things. Todd's still on board. And Charley's got experience with concert tours. I think we'll make out just fine. And it's only three more dates."

"Let's remember something," Dallas said. "I just wanted to write and record. And now that Charley's back in my life, that's exactly what I'm going to do. So you can come along for the rest of this ride or not. I'd just as soon not but it's up to you. The contract will still be in force for two more months."

Sawyer's internal struggle was visible to all of us. I was sure he was torn between telling Dallas to go fuck himself and doing what he had to in order to save face. After all, if he wanted to sign other clients after this he couldn't afford to embarrass himself in public.

"Fine," he said at last. "I might have been a little hasty here. I apologize. It's just been difficult adjusting to changes in our relationship."

Dallas actually laughed. "Our relationship? We're not married, Sawyer. Just connected by a piece of paper."

The man studied Dallas again as if searching for some answer. "You've changed a lot, Dallas. Really a lot."

"That's what I've been trying to tell you. So." He sat up straighter. "Some ground rules. You'll still handle the media, the promoter and the other details you're always so busy with. Morgan and Charley take care of everything else. And I make all the decisions."

"Dallas—" he started.

Dallas held up a hand. "That's it. Take it or leave it. Three more shows and it's over."

Sawyer looked as if he'd swallowed something unpleasant but he pasted a smile on his face. "Fine. Of course. So let's talk about the media."

Because Dallas and I had already gotten our story together, that conversation took less than five minutes.

"What about the new t-shirts that Creative Solutions designed? And the other merchandise?" Dallas asked. "Is everything ready for tomorrow night?"

"New t-shirts?" I asked, happy for a change of subject.

"Sawyer thought we needed a fresh look," Morgan told me. "The company that does Dallas' artwork came up with a new graphic. How does it look?"

"I think you'll be pleased," Sawyer said in his most conciliatory tone. "Everything will be at the concert tomorrow night."

"Be sure there are some t-shirts in the dressing room."

"And that you leave sizes for Charley and Morgan," Dallas added.

Sawyer nodded. "Of course."

"What about the road crew?"

"They'll all have them on. I'll make sure of it." He closed his briefcase and stood up. "I'll see you tomorrow at the arena. In plenty of time for the press conference."

I forced a smile and held out my hand, determined to be professional despite everything. After all, whatever I did now reflected on Dallas as well. "Thank you, Sawyer. I know Dallas appreciates everything you do for him."

He shook my hand briefly. "I certainly hope he knows what he's doing."

And then he was gone.

"Well." Morgan blew out a breath, leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs out under the table. "For what it's worth, Dallas, you did the right thing. If Sawyer wasn't on such a power trip none of this would have been a problem. Face it. He loved it when it was just the two of you and he controlled you, the band, everyone. You didn't breathe unless he told you to."

"Yes, and look how well that turned out." I couldn't keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

"I did well for a long time, darlin'. There's no denying Sawyer made it happen."

I took one of his hands and linked my fingers with his. "But you're the talent. You've more than paid your dues. Now you're in a position to call the shots." I paused. "Did you really mean it? About quitting after the final date?"

He held out his hand to me and I took it, dropping onto the couch next to him. "More than I've ever meant anything in my life. Except when I told you I love you."

Morgan unfolded himself from his chair. "Let's put Sawyer Black to rest for the night. I'm getting out of here and giving the two of you some privacy. Dallas, you're favoring the leg. Do the hot packs again tonight."

Dallas grinned. "Okay, Dad."

After Morgan left I pushed the room service table out into the hallway then checked all the outside doors again, making sure deadbolts and chains were on.

"How about another soak in the hot tub?" I asked Dallas. "Then we'll do the hot packs again."

His eyes gleamed with mischief. "Only if you come in there with me."

I recognized that look, the one that had snagged my heart first when I was eighteen years old. Heat curled in my body in response, my breasts aching and my pussy quivering and instantly damp.

"Okay," I agreed. "But just to soak."

"Whatever you say, darlin'." His grin widened. "Whatever you say."

I turned on the water in the hot tub to give it time to fill, sprinkling some bath oil into it, something with an ocean breeze scent, and made sure the bath towels were on the warming bar.

"Go ahead and get in when it's filled," I told Dallas. "I just want to check my messages and touch base with Chase and make sure one more time that Mike's all set for tomorrow."

"Charley." He came up behind me and slid his arms around me, crossing them over my stomach. One hand slid down to the hot spot between my thighs, his fingers rubbing lightly. "Mike has tomorrow memorized. Let it go for tonight."

"All right." I sighed. "You win."

I shooed Dallas into the bathroom while I put my gun and holster on the nightstand and I took off my clothes. When I walked into the bathroom Dallas was in the hot tub, lying with his head resting against the back. This time he'd taken one of the special pillows to cushion his neck. He had his eyes closed and the fragrant steam was rising through the bubbles to surround him.

It seemed I had loved Dallas Creed for most of my life, at least half of which I'd spent trying to hate him. All those years I had never stopped loving him, despite what I'd tried for so long to tell myself. Now I had taken a leap across a great chasm and it actually felt good. I just had to make sure I kept him from getting killed so we could have our happy ever after.

Happy ever after. I kept repeating it to myself like a mantra. After all these years, it seemed as if we were finally going to have one.

I tossed my clothes onto the little upholstered chair in the corner and walked slowly into the bathroom. Dallas must have sensed me because I walked too softly for him to hear. He opened his eyes and that famous slow smile spread across his face.

"Hey, darlin'." His drawl was thicker than liquid sugar. "Come on in. The water's fine."

I stepped into the tub and lowered myself so I was kneeling in front of him. Leaning forward, I pressed my mouth to his. His lips were warm and damp from the steam and he tasted delicious. I licked them with slow strokes of my tongue, savoring the essence of him. Resting my hands on his shoulders, I pressed my breasts against the wet hair on his chest and rubbed them back and forth. Against my thighs, I could feel the rising and swelling of his cock. A groan vibrated low in his throat.

I pressed harder with my tongue until his mouth opened for me. Then I thrust inside, plundering him as he usually did to me. Inside he was hot liquid that scorched me down to my toes, and my breathing quickened. Dallas lifted his hands from the water and cupped my face, slanting it so we had a better angle.

I closed my eyes, letting myriad sensations wash over me. Around us the water bubbled and frothed. The scented steam enclosed us as surely as if someone had drawn a curtain around us. And I had the feeling that at this moment, Dallas and I were the only two people in the world.

When I had drunk my fill of him I sat back on my heels, the water surging around my neck, and trailed my hands over his chest. I loved the way his eyes darkened when my fingernails scraped over his flat nipples. I twisted the nubs gently, the way he did to mine, and his body tightened beneath my touch. When I slid my hands down even farther to grasp the thickness of his cock, he tried to change my position so I straddled him. I shook my head.

"Tonight it's my turn to make you feel good," I told him. "You're such an unselfish lover. Let me do this for you for a change."

"But I want you to feel good too," he protested.

I smiled. "I do feel good. And I'll feel even better. I promise."

When he opened his mouth to protest again, I lifted one hand and pressed my fingers to his lips.

"Shh. Tonight it's my show. Just close your eyes and go with it, okay?"

I moved my hand beneath the water again and curled my fingers around his shaft. I could feel the pulsing of his blood through the vein that wrapped around his erection. Touched the velvety softness of the broad head and the furled skin of the corona. I pressed the pad of my thumb against the slit and was rewarded with a sharp intake of his breath. His hands, which were clasping my upper arms, tightened their grip.

Watching the play of emotion on his face, I stroked my hands up and down his cock, root to tip, in wet, gliding movements. Slowly, taking my time, drawing out each slippery caress, I coaxed him to a fuller erection. His shaft swelled beneath my fingers and his groans became one steady, low hum. When I shifted one hand between his thighs to cup his balls, his grip on me tightened even more.

Up and down, again and again, I rubbed and rubbed, drawing out the stimulation until he began to beg.

"Jesus, Charley, you're killing me here. Please, please, please, darlin'. Faster."

I leaned forward just enough to touch my mouth to his, licking his lips again and sliding my tongue between them. As he twirled his tongue with mine, I increased the pace of my hands. More, more, the water bubbling and swirling around us, Dallas' hips jerking upward.

I could feel his orgasm rushing up—the tightening of his balls, the clenching of his thighs around me, his teeth clamping down on my tongue, his cock flexing in my hands. And then he was there, semen pulsing from him as I squeezed and stroked, fingers cupping his balls. He breathed my name into my mouth as his body shook and shuddered, and I held him in my hand until the last spasm had subsided.

His breath sawed in and out of his mouth as he dragged in air. He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me against his chest, and I could feel the heavy thudding of his heart. We stayed in that position for a long time, until his heart rate slowed and his breathing evened out.

For a fleeting moment I wished we could stay cocooned like this forever, shutting out everyone and everything else, although I knew it was impossible.

Finally Dallas tilted my face up and treated me to a long, lingering kiss, equal parts heat and tenderness.

"That was amazing," he said when he lifted his mouth from mine. "I may not have enough energy to move for another week."

I chuckled. "Good. It'll keep you out of trouble."

His hands pressed me against him. "I love you, Charley."

I love you too, Dallas.

So why couldn't I say the words? Why was I holding back now, when it was all going to be out there for the world to see? But I knew that last tiny chamber of my heart was still locked away, insurance against pain.

* * * * *

When his cell phone rang, Heartless looked at the readout and swore. He should have thrown the phone away instead of the remains of his lunch. He was not in the mood for this shit today.

"What?"

"If I were you, I'd be a lot more polite when answering the phone." The sound of Cesar Munoz's voice was like the hissing of a snake.

Heartless wished he could take his gun and blow the man's head off.

"I'm as polite as I need to be. Get off my back. I've got enough troubles."

There was a long moment of silence. "There'll be a lot more for you to worry about if you do not get this problem taken care of. Do you know someone is sniffing around the accounts of everyone connected with Dallas Creed?"

Heartless froze. Hell and damnation.

"How do you know?"

"How do I know anything?" The man's voice was filled with quiet menace. "I have tentacles that stretch into many places."

Heartless was willing to bet he did. And "tentacles" was a very appropriate term. Cesar Munoz was like an octopus, strangling him. Heartless had his own reasons for having gotten involved in this mess. Not for the first time he cursed the situation that had driven him into this. Once again he considered making a pitch for just getting out altogether. Everyone had made more than enough money. Now it was just a matter of greed. And gluttony.

"I told you I would take care of it and I will," he said into the cell phone.

"We are about to run out of time."

Heartless frowned. "Why? What do you mean?" What could possibly have gone wrong now?

"Have you seen the latest gossip columns?" Munoz asked.

Heartless snorted a laugh. "You're kidding, right? I don't read that shit."

"Perhaps you should. They've uncovered the relationship between Creed and Charley Roper. Everyone and everything will now be under an even greater spotlight. That will definitely cut into your opportunities to do something. To accomplish this."

"I can get around that." Big words. He swallowed the bile rising up in his throat. "I have to be careful. They're already looking at me crosswise. I'm hoping they finally just decided I'm naturally unpleasant and that's all, but who knows? I can't draw any more attention to myself. I need to pick the right time."

"Then do so. Otherwise it will be *your* body the police will find. And maybe your family."

Heartless started to reply until he realized he'd be talking to dead air. He threw the phone down on the bed and rubbed his forehead. What he needed was a solution to this problem, and quickly. Anything overt was beyond consideration. Too many of those fucking Roper people around. No, it would have to be something more subtle. Something he could do practically under everyone's noses. But what the hell could that be?

The headache that had been trying to bully its way up was beginning to roar in earnest. He leaned back in his chair, trying to sort out the mess in his brain. A kernel of information fell out of his memory bank that gave birth to a glimmer of an idea. Could he do it? Did he have the balls to do it right under everyone's noses?

He sure as shit didn't have a lot of options open to him. He had no doubt Munoz would carry out his threat and the thought made him sick. A dead Dallas Creed would solve everyone's problems. Closing his eyes, he began turning over in his mind all the logistics needed to make it happen.

Picking up the cell phone, he punched in the number for Munoz. The man answered on the first ring.

"If I'm going to do this I need you to get something for me. I'm under a microscope and can't be seen buying it."

And then he told the asshole what he needed.

Chapter Sixteen

When I opened my eyes the next morning at seven thirty Dallas was already up and brushing his teeth.

"I thought I'd have to drag you out of bed," I told him.

He leaned in the doorway to the bedroom, holding his toothbrush. His eyes had a soft look to them when they met mine. "I'm always up early the day of a show. After all these years I still get performance nerves."

"That's so hard to believe. It must be second nature to you by now."

"Darlin', every show's always like the first one. You want them to love you and you're afraid they'll hate you. Or the sound will go out. Or one of the amps." He paused. "Or a light will fall."

"Don't even joke about that." I stretched. "God. I'm glad it's you and not me. Try to relax if you can. I'll go order the coffee service and pastries. Todd will be here at eight thirty."

"And he's never late."

This time was no exception. He knocked on the door of the suite right on time. We greeted each other with forced pleasantness and I waved my hand at the credenza.

"Plenty of coffee, as ordered."

One of Todd's responsibilities was to take careful notes on every performance—sound, lighting, songs the band did well, those they hit sour notes on, changes in stage setup. With everything that was happening, he and Dallas hadn't really had a chance to meet since San Antonio, and they now had two shows to review.

I busied myself on my netbook, answering email while they talked in low tones, Todd with his ever-present yellow pad filled with pages of cramped writing and diagrams, Dallas asking questions and making suggestions. Finally they were finished and Todd left, nodding silently at me as he let himself out.

"I don't think he likes me," I told Dallas.

"Join the crowd. Todd doesn't like much of anyone. Just ignore him."

I made myself push his arms away and turn around. "Call me obsessive but I just want to make sure we're set for anything. Especially the media meet. Go on. I'll be there in a minute."

I called Mike who patiently reviewed the details with me again, and Chase who assured me all was good on his end. I asked them both to join Dallas and me for breakfast at nine thirty. If we were going public about my private life, I owed it to my very loyal staff to let them know first.

Next was Jacquie, whose shriek when I told her about Dallas and me nearly shattered my eardrum. Finally I checked my messages on my BlackBerry and discovered I had one from Lynette Touhey that caught my eye.

"I may have something for you to chew on tomorrow. Maybe a whole mouthful. I'll call you late in the afternoon. Don't call me. You'll hear from me when I'm sure of what I found."

"Don't call me." That was like waving a red flag in front of me. But I knew Lynette. If I called, she'd see my number on the readout and just let it go to voice mail. She wouldn't talk to me until she had her facts together. That was just the way she worked.

I took extra care with my clothes and makeup, doing my best not to let Dallas see my unexpected fit of anxiety.

"Everything will be just fine." Dallas brushed my hair aside and kissed my neck. "Trust me."

"I do," I told him.

Still, I was somewhat nervous when Chase and Mike arrived and room service delivered breakfast. I pretty much knew what everyone ate, anyway. Morgan made himself scarce so I'd have this time with my men to be private, just Dallas and me and the two of them. After they showed up practically on each other's heels, I flitted around pouring coffee and making sure everyone's order was right.

Finally Dallas said to me, "For god's sake, Charley, sit down."

Mike and Chase were watching me, curiosity plain in their expression. I knew they weren't used to seeing their boss unnerved in any way at all. "Iron Control Charley", they always called me. In the worst situations, I never lost my cool. All my years with the FBI and Hillcroft had trained me well.

I sat down at the table, opened my napkin and placed it in my lap, and folded my hands in front of me. Chase and Mike looked at each other.

"Are you firing us?" Mike asked at last.

"Firing you?" A nervous laugh burst from my mouth. "Oh my god, no. Is that what you thought?"

Chase cleared his throat. "We thought maybe after all the fiascos we were in deep shit and you asked us to breakfast to give us the ax. Kind of a last meal, you know?"

Dallas put his fork down on his plate and took my hand in his. I could see the two men look at us, at each other again. Then back at me.

"Okay, okay." I took a deep breath and let it out. I seemed to be doing a lot of deep breathing lately. "I'm sure you're both aware by now that Dallas and I knew each other a long time ago. That we had...a relationship."

Mike and Chase nodded dutifully.

"We hadn't seen each other in a long time, until the agency was hired for this gig. Anyway, in the last few days we've reconnected."

I paused, trying to figure out what to say next. Dallas squeezed my hand.

Mike laughed, a warm, hearty sound. "Charley, if you're trying to tell us you and Dallas are a couple, or together, or whatever it's called, it's been pretty obvious since yesterday." He looked around the suite. "Especially since it's hard not to notice this suite only has one bedroom."

I felt heat on my cheeks. When I glanced sideways at Dallas, he was grinning.

"Darlin', I think the only one you were keeping it from was yourself." He looked at both men. "I'm the one who screwed things up between us the first time around. I plan to more than make up for it. I want you to know she's the most important thing in my life."

I lowered my eyes, embarrassed, and took a quick sip of coffee. "I had kind of planned to let the situation just...happen, but it seems the entertainment reporters are speculating. They'll be asking questions at today's media conference, so we decided it would only make things worse if we tried to duck their questions. After this afternoon it will be public knowledge, and we wanted you to know about it first."

Mike pushed his chair back and came around to give me a kiss on the cheek. Then he and Chase shook hands with Dallas.

"Anyone who had eyes could see what was happening," Chase said. "And if I can speak for our entire staff, we're all thrilled that you finally have someone in your life."

I glared at him. "Are you telling me my private life is the subject of office gossip?"

"Only because we all love and respect you," Mike said in a quiet voice. "You work your ass off, drive yourself for the clients and the agency. We want you to have someone who's there for you."

For a frightening moment I was afraid I was going to cry. I swallowed past the lump in my throat, unbelievably touched by the affection my staff had for me. I didn't know what to say.

"Thank you," Dallas said for me. "I know Charley appreciates it."

"Have you called Jacquie?" Mike wanted to know.

I nodded. "Early this morning. I'm surprised you didn't hear her shrieking all the way from San Antonio."

"Jacquie does tend to be enthusiastic about things," Chase commented, and grinned.

"We'll need to beef up the security at the media conference because of this," I told them. "I suspect the crowd will be larger than usual. Also, I don't know who Sawyer Black has been talking to, but the record label people may show up early and they'll probably have guests with them. I wish I knew exactly who else will show up."

"Do we want to borrow some people from Matt Genaro's office?" Mike asked.

Matt Genaro and I had been FBI agents together in my other life. He had left to start his own agency here in Atlanta a year after I left the feds, opening as a one-man office and growing rapidly until he now had a huge operation. We often supplemented each other when the occasion called for it.

"Good idea. I'll call him as soon as we're finished here and see who he can spare."

"What time are we leaving for the arena today? We need to meet whoever Matt sends and brief them, then do a thorough walk-through of the entire place."

"At least this time the dressing rooms are under roof," Chase pointed out. "Mike and I studied the diagrams again last night after dinner and we're pretty sure we've got a handle on it, but after what happened in Fort Worth, we don't want to take any chances."

"I agree." I looked at Dallas. "I don't want you to have to hang out there any longer than you have to. What do you think?"

He shrugged. "Sound check's at four thirty. Then I need a little down time before the media hordes descend. If we get there at four, is that good enough?"

I looked at Mike and Chase again. "What do you think?"

"I'll be there early with the band and the road crew," Chase pointed out. "I can meet Matt's people and go over the layout with them. Figure out where we need the extra people."

"All right. That sounds like a plan. I'll call Matt as soon as we're through with breakfast to see who he'll send so I can have Morgan get ID tags for them."

We talked a little more while we finished eating. Then Mike and Chase excused themselves and Dallas and I lingered over another cup of coffee.

"You have a very loyal, caring staff," he commented.

"They're all good people. Most of them have been with me since I opened the doors."

"You obviously take very good care of them. Only a great boss inspires that kind of loyalty."

I laughed. "Sometimes I haven't been so sure which of us was in charge, but it's all worked out really well."

"I want you to know I'm really impressed watching you," he told me. "You're very good at what you do."

"Thanks, but I'll be a lot better when we get the answers we need and I find out who's trying to kill you."

Dallas leaned back in his chair and tunneled his fingers through his hair. "You know, I've been thinking about this a lot the last couple of days, especially since it seems whoever it is can get as close to me as he wants to. But I just can't figure out who it could be. I can't think of anyone I've pissed off that much. Except Randy and I just don't see him as the type."

I nibbled on my thumbnail. "I'm worried about Sawyer too."

Dallas raised an eyebrow? "Why? If I'd fired him earlier on I might agree with you but all of this was set in motion long before last night."

"Just...I don't know. Something's off somewhere here and I can't pinpoint it. I'm missing something and it's driving me crazy. Something I'm overlooking. Something to do with access to you." I sighed and tried to clear my brain. "Do you want to do the hot packs one more time? I'm going to check my messages and call the office again to let them know about Matt Genaro."

"I think I'll tinker around with the guitar. I've got some stuff running around in my brain."

I was amazed that he was able to write music in the middle of all this garbage. "Okay. That's good. I'll give you all the space you need."

Dallas grabbed my hand and pulled me toward him. "Charley, you never need to give me space. Other people maybe, but definitely not you."

He kissed me, hard and quick with plenty of tongue. When he let me go his smoky-gray eyes had darkened to slate. "When all this is over, we're going to make some plans. Count on it."

My lips still tingled as I watched him head into the bedroom. Then I mentally shook myself. I had work to do. Daydreaming would come later.

I put in a call to Matt Genaro, who was happy to loan me five of his men. Then on to Morgan to bring him up to speed and tell him about the ID tags. That accomplished, I called the office and had to listen to Jacquie gush again about my news.

"Enough," I finally laughed. "Please."

"Charley, it's just that we're all so happy for you. And Dallas Creed. Holy mother, he's every woman's wet dream."

"Okay, I think that's more than I wanted to know. What's happening?"

"Rick wants to talk to you. Hold on and I'll put you through."

In less than ten seconds Rick Chandler came on the line.

"I've been doing some deeper digging into the key people in this mess, Charley, and there's some real interesting inconsistencies."

My hand tightened on the phone. More than anyone who worked for me, Rick could find the unfindable. Maybe this was the break I'd been hoping for. "Let's have it."

"Todd Mullins first. We finally tracked down his wife and son. Bad news there, boss."

I got the pitch-and-roll feeling in my stomach that always presaged bad news. "Lay it on me."

"He and his wife separated twelve years ago. Never divorced though."

"That's not bad news, just familiar news. Too many stories like that. But why no divorce?"

"They have a son who's brain damaged." I could hear Rick clicking netbook keys. "I finally ran down a relative who has no use for Todd. Says the son was born about a year after the marriage. When he was two he was outside playing. A toddler, you know?"

Todd was supposed to be watching him but he was walking, plenty adventurous, somehow got out into the street and got hit by a car."

Holy mother! I swallowed hard.

"What happened?"

"They called the paramedics and rushed him to the hospital right away but the neurological damage was too great to reverse more than partially. There was only so much that could be done."

"Rick, that's terrible." I closed my eyes, imagining the terrible pain Todd and his wife must have suffered. Continue to suffer.

"He's been in a special institution since then. The wife blames Todd and I guess he blames himself. Anyway, they stay married so Todd can keep them on the health insurance Dallas provides for the band and road crew. But that place the boy is in is expensive. Todd makes plenty good money with Dallas but I don't think it covers everything. He's got to be making money from someplace else."

"I agree, but I don't see how it gives him a motive to kill Dallas. He'd lose more than he'd gain. Right?"

"Just giving you the facts." More keys clicking. "I'm waiting to hear from Lynette again too. See what else she's found."

"What else?" I was impatient for some piece of news that would give us a concrete clue.

"Here's a puzzler for you," Rick said. "At least once a month, Sawyer Black disappears from the face of the earth for two days."

"Disappears?" I wrinkled my forehead. "I don't understand."

"You know me. I dig through everything I can. I've been trying to reconstruct a profile on him, going back to when Dallas had his first number one hit. Before that, Sawyer was just a greasy pitchman with as much luck as guts. And he rarely let Dallas out of his sights. But about two years into the big tours an anomaly began to appear."

"Do I even want to know how you're getting this information?" I asked.

"All legal, Charley," he assured me. "I promise you. Just greasing a lot of palms and calling in a lot of favors. I figured this client is a top priority so I'm going at it full tilt."

"All right. So how often is he gone and where does he go?"

"The how often, like I said, is once a month, and he's done it consistently except for the three years after the accident. The where is something I'm still working on."

The tickle in my gut was building. Still, there was nothing to give us a clue as to why either of these men would want Dallas dead.

"I need to have a motive for the killing," I reminded Rick. That was the hang-up here. Why would either Todd or Sawyer want Dallas dead?

"Still working on it, but so far it seems that he's the man no one wants to kill." I heard a short buzz in the background. The intercom.

"Go. Take the call. Just get back to me as soon as you can. And find me something."

I sat back in my chair and closed my eyes, trying to make sense of everything I'd just learned. I might despise Sawyer Black, and Todd Mullins didn't have the best social skills, but that didn't make either of them killers. And I was still missing the main ingredient. Motive. And I had the uncomfortable feeling we were running out of time.

* * * * *

Heartless' cell phone rang just as he finished lunch. He'd managed to steal an hour for himself to get his shit together. But when he looked at the caller ID he knew that was out the window. At the first sentence his stomach clenched with a combination of anticipation and anxiety.

"I have what you asked for. It arrived in Atlanta this morning."

Cesar Munoz's voice was soft but with an underlying edge of steel, the threat he'd made implicit in his tone.

"How do I get it?"

"Someone will meet you in thirty minutes." He gave the name of a diner on the east side of Atlanta. "Can you get there without your shadow?"

"I'll make it happen."

"Are you sure this will work?"

"Everyone knows about his allergy. The bitch watches his food like a hawk so this was all I could figure out. Even then I'm gonna have to be real sly about it."

"Don't fuck up. You know the consequences if you fail."

Oh yes. Munoz had made it clear. Kill Dallas Creed or Munoz would erase him and his family.

"I said I'd take care of it and I will."

He hung up and dressed hastily. He was glad his room was at the end of the hall, near the fire stairs. He'd be out and back before anyone even knew he was gone.

* * * * *

Matt Genaro's men arrived at two thirty, politely introduced themselves and listened intently to their instructions. I should have felt better but I didn't. Waiting to hear from Lynette and Rick again made me antsy and irritated. I tried not to show it as we piled into the three SUVs to head for Peachtree Arena and pulled away in a convoy. The SUVs in front and back of us were driven by Genaro agents, each with a partner riding shotgun. I was as nervous as a tick throughout the ride, my eyes constantly shifting from one window to the other although I didn't think whoever this was would be stupid enough to try another stop-and-shoot. Chase and his team had left earlier with the band and the roadies, and he'd called an all clear when they got there.

At the facility we pulled up close to the stage door and boxed it in with the three vehicles. Matt's men exited their SUVs first and scanned the area. At their signal Mike and Morgan got out of the front seat of our vehicle and Mike opened the rear door on the side of the SUV away from the building. I nudged Dallas out first, my gun in my hand, scanning the area myself. In seconds we were all inside.

"So far so good," I breathed to Mike. "Although I don't believe there will be any more outside attempts."

He nodded his agreement. "Too much protection and too many eyes. Besides, if whoever this is can get close enough to Dallas to orchestrate everything that's happened, we need to be looking closer to home."

"Chase has someone checking every single ID badge on every person who even peeks into the area around here. And Rick said he has some leads but he's out of the office, I assume following one of them. I don't dare call him on his cell and disrupt something. Also I'm still waiting for Lynette Touhey to call."

Mike squeezed my arm. "It will be all right, Charley. We'll make sure it is."

Chase had indeed stationed someone with a clipboard at the top of the stairs leading to the stage. At the moment he was giving a careful inspection to a skinny kid in a Dallas Creed t-shirt and jeans. The kid was holding up the badge hanging from his neck and arguing. I told Mike to walk with Dallas to the backstage area and stick to him like glue while Dallas took out his guitar to get ready for the sound check. I noticed he handed the case to Morgan, who held it with an iron grip. No accidents this time.

I stopped to chat with my man holding the clipboard. A twenty-something male was jabbering at him. "Trouble, Steve?"

"Not at all, Charley. Just double-checking all the Bageris Promotions badges."

"I'm telling you," the kid said, "I work here all the time. I help out backstage."

I could see Steve had the kid's driver's license on his clipboard, and I smiled. Steve could give the Grim Reaper fits with his stoic expression.

"Don't get your boxers in a wad, kid. This will just take a minute."

I watched him compare the driver's license photo with the one on the badge. Finally he nodded his head and checked a name off on the clipboard. The kid grabbed his license and sprinted off angrily.

"He'll think twice about mouthing off again," Steve told me. I could have sworn a smile teased at his mouth but then it was gone.

Everyone was as tense as a high wire during the sound check. Instead of standing as he always did halfway to the back by the sound engineers, Todd Mullins paced in the aisle, scribbling on his pad of paper. One of the roadies dropped a light he was hanging. It was saved from destruction only by the fact its cord was looped over part of the scaffolding and disrupted its fall. Todd cursed loudly and colorfully as he ran toward the stage.

"What the fuck? How many years you been doing this, asswipe? You know how much that light costs?"

They retrieved the light but it brought home to me how jittery everyone was.

"I've got two men in Dallas' dressing room." Chase had come up behind me and was talking softly in my ear. "They've been at their posts since we arrived. I also made sure we did a full sweep and checked every corner or nook."

"Thank you." I answered him without taking my eyes off Dallas. He was going through his pre-sound-check routine the way he usually did but I could see the lines of tension in his body. He'd appeared to handle everything so calmly up until now, but I could tell it was getting to him. I needed answers, and quickly.

"Is it true Sawyer Black's on a short leash?" he asked very quietly.

I nodded, not even bothering to ask how he knew. My staff could ferret out secrets from a deaf mute.

"He'll be here for the glad handing but Morgan's really running everything now."

"Works for me." He moved away, on to his next task.

When everyone was satisfied that the system was good to go, Todd climbed up on the stage to go over some last-minute notes with Dallas. Then Mike and I walked Dallas to his dressing room off the corridor at the rear of the stage. I was happy to see it was far enough away from the vendors to keep the public away. I introduced myself to the two Genaro men on duty and told them they could report to Chase to see where they were needed. Mike, Dallas and I settled into the dressing room.

Dallas stretched out full-length on the couch, again rubbing his thigh.

"Would you like some acetaminophen?" I asked him.

"Not yet. Maybe before the show." He closed his eyes and pulled the ever-present ball cap over his eyes.

"Why the Houston Texans cap?" I asked out of curiosity.

"We did a halftime show there," he told me, "and one of the things they gave me was this cap." He pulled it off his head and showed me the inside of it. "Everyone on the team signed it. The ink's kind of faded and blended since then but it's kind of been my good luck charm."

"Let's hope the luck continues to hold." I checked my watch. "Forty-five minutes to the media."

"I know. Give me twenty to unwind a little then make sure I'm up."

At that moment my BlackBerry signaled an incoming call. I looked at the readout. Rick. "I'm going to take this outside," I announced.

"No secrets, Charley," Dallas reminded me.

"I promise to tell you anything as soon as I have real information." I hurried out into the corridor and punched Talk. "I hope you've got something, Rick."

"Probably more than you want to know," he answered. "Starting about fifteen years ago, Sawyer Black began taking a trip once a month out of the country. Any guess as to where?"

"Mexico?" I ventured. Mentioning the first thing that came to my mind.

"Sometimes, but mostly to Bolivia."

"Bolivia?" I felt my eyebrows rise. "What's in Bolivia?"

"A fertile growing area for the coca leaf."

"Cocaine!" My whole body tightened and I had a sudden urge to throw up.

"You got it in one. And what is it they say on television? 'But wait, there's more?'"

I leaned against the wall to steady myself. "Give it to me."

"He doesn't fly commercial," Rick went on. "Not our Sawyer. He goes first class on a private plane belonging to Cesar Munoz."

I frowned. The name was not familiar to me. "Who's that?"

Rick chuffed a humorless laugh. "I'm not surprised you've never heard of him. He keeps a very, very low profile. But he's the head of one of the deadliest cocaine cartels in the world."

"Rick." I swallowed hard. "I'm having a lot of trouble with this. What in the hell does Sawyer Black have to do with cocaine and Cesar Munoz? And how does that affect Dallas?"

"I'm still working on it, but you won't like this next part."

Oh god. What next? "What?"

"Kind of an ironic twist to everything. They call Cesar the *Angel de la Muerte*." He paused. "The Death Angel."

For a long moment I couldn't breathe. Holy hell.

"Charley?" I heard Rick's voice in my ear. "You there? You okay?"

I blinked my eyes to focus myself. "Yes, I'm here. No, I'm not okay. There's obviously some kind of connection between the cocaine and Dallas. We have to find it. And also figure out if Todd Mullins is somehow involved. He's obviously a man who needs a lot of money."

"Still on it."

"Anything that ties Randy Mueller into this?" I asked.

"Not that I can find. Want me to keep after it?"

"I guess. I don't want to leave anything hanging out there." At that moment I heard the click signaling another call coming in. "Rick, Lynette's calling me. Let me get right back to you." I depressed the button to connect to the other call. "Please tell me you have information," I pleaded.

"Yes, and none of it's good."

"Rick just said almost the same thing before he unloaded on me. Does this have to do with Sawyer Black, Cesar Munoz and cocaine?"

"Damn." I heard a slight intake of breath. "That guy is good."

"The best," I agreed. "So what did you get? Something that ties it all to Dallas and explains why a killer is after him?"

"Getting close." I heard her clicking away on her netbook. "I'm sure Rick told you about Sawyer Black's regular trips to Bolivia. La Paz."

"Yes." I nodded, an automatic movement. I knew she couldn't see me. "For years now. So whatever's going on, it didn't just start with this tour."

"You're right, it didn't." Again some clicking. "Like I told you last time, Black's been socking money away for years in his offshore accounts, so he's obviously profiting well from this relationship. He's also spending some of it on big items."

"Rick says he owns enormous chunks of real estate among other things. I don't understand how he flies under the IRS radar."

"He files his returns properly, showing a large enough income that no one blinks. The weird thing is, he's so smooth about it no one spots anything. For example, he gives no indication where the cash came from to buy his condo in Houston. It just shows up on his return when he reports the taxes he pays on it."

"Damn." I nibbled on my bottom lip. "Tell me how this connects to Dallas? I can't believe he knows anything about this."

"Don't get your panties in a twist, girlfriend. I can promise you Dallas is cleaner than a newborn babe. But there's a link here somewhere."

"Then tell me what it is," I demanded. "And why someone wants to kill him because of it."

"It has to be in the transport of it," Lynette said. "I think I'll call Rick and get us together. At this point we need to pool our resources. And Charley? I contacted the Drug Enforcement Agency. They need to be part of this."

"I know, I know."

"Lane Hallowell, the local agent, was already after Munoz so it's not like this is brand new to them. He's got his office mobilized."

"When will I hear from you again? Either of you? And will we be able to get through this concert tonight?"

"Hopefully."

She clicked off and I sagged against the wall. This was getting worse by the minute. And I had no intention of telling Dallas anything until after the performance. He didn't need this on his brain while he was out there on the stage. Meanwhile we both needed to get ready to meet the media, something I was looking forward to less and less.

"Anything?" Morgan asked as I let myself back into the dressing room.

I shook my head. "Nothing concrete yet." I couldn't tell him yet either. What if he let something slip to Dallas? Or gave it away in some other manner? "Everyone's still working on it. They have some threads they're following but they haven't gotten to the end yet."

He checked his watch. "We need to wake Dallas so he has time to get his head together."

"I'm awake," Dallas mumbled. He pushed the cap back on his head and sat up, swinging his legs off the couch. "I'm going to take a shower."

The star dressing rooms at the Peachtree came with small bathrooms, a blessing, I was sure, for performers who came off the stage sweaty and tired. "Anyone check my clothes for intruders?"

"I did," Morgan told him. "I'll do it again and leave them in the bathroom for you."

A pair of jeans hung on the wall on a hook, next to one holding the garment bag with the stage clothes. On a table to the left of them was a pile of neatly folded t-shirts. Morgan took the jeans and shook them out, flipped through the t-shirts until he found the right size and added a clean pair of boxers to the pile.

"He wants to do the media meet in the new shirt," Morgan said. "He'll change into the stage duds afterward."

After he carried the clothes into the bathroom, I lifted one of the t-shirts and shook it out, curious to see the newest piece of merchandise.

I had to admit I was impressed. The shirts were black, and in the center, in a meticulously drawn graphic, was Dallas' face. On his head was the trademark Stetson he always wore when he walked onstage and in promotional pictures. Beneath it, in flowing script, was written *Dallas Creed*.

"Find your size," Morgan said, coming back into the room. "If you remember, Dallas insisted the Sawyer have the wardrobe guy leave some for both of us." He grinned. "Maybe you should wear one for the media too."

I made a face. "No chance. They'll be all over me as it is. We'll take the pile back to the hotel with us and divvy them up."

"Okay," he teased, "but you're missing your best opportunity to be a groupie."

"Thanks," I snorted. "An image I can do without."

I stuck my BlackBerry into my jacket pocket and picked up the hand-tooled boots lined up beneath the clothes. Very carefully I upended them and shook them thoroughly, then unrolled the clean socks on the table and shook out each of them.

"I'm not taking any chances with stray vermin," I told Morgan. "Even though as far as we can tell no one's been in here but Chase since the trailers were delivered."

Sawyer Black knocked on the door of the dressing room precisely on the dot of seven.

"Let's go," he said to Dallas, reaching for his arm.

Dallas slipped adroitly from the man's grasp and held out his hand to me. "Time to meet the lions." He squeezed my hand and we all trooped out of the dressing room.

I had faced people like this dozens of times when I'd traveled with clients. This was the first time, however, that I'd be as much an object of interest as Dallas. I had the uncomfortable feeling I was about to face a firing squad.

Chapter Seventeen

Sawyer had commandeered an empty meeting room at the back end of the arena for this event. When we walked in I was nearly blinded by the lights cameramen were using and the shouting began as soon as they saw Dallas.

"Hey, big guy," someone shouted. "You've been keeping secrets from us."

"Why didn't you tell us the other day?" another person yelled.

Still cameras clicked and video cameras ground away as Sawyer Black pushed us to the front of the room.

"All right, all right," he said in a loud voice, and held up his hand for attention. "We'll get this started. Then you can ask questions."

He positioned himself in front of the microphone he'd had set up, a gaudy diamond pinky ring glittering in the lights. I noticed the bolo tie he was wearing also had a diamond in the center of the slide. His suit today was gray and extremely well cut. And obviously expensive. I found myself noticing those little details a lot more. And since Dallas' decision and my phone calls with Rick and Lynette I could barely stomach being in the same room with the man.

I looked up as Sawyer started to speak and saw four men crowding into the back of the room. They were dressed casually although not in jeans. Each of them wore slacks and polo shirts and looked vaguely out of place.

"Record people," Dallas whispered in my ear. "And George Bageris, the promoter. Don't worry. I've got it."

I hadn't even heard what Sawyer was saying but I saw the look of anger on his face when Dallas stepped up to the microphone, tugging me with him.

"I believe Sawyer thinks he's the star of the party," he joked, "but I know y'all really didn't come here to see him."

"We want to talk about the lady," someone shouted.

Dallas faked a look of astonishment. "You mean y'all didn't come here to see my ugly face?"

Everyone was hollering at once and Dallas held up his hand, much as Sawyer had done. Sawyer, who was fuming next to him and trying not to stare me into the floor.

"Hold it. I've got a little statement for you, so if y'all will just shut up," he gave them his famous grin, "you'll get to hear what I have to say."

The sound dropped to a murmur and Dallas pulled me even closer to him, putting his arm around my shoulders.

"I'd like to officially introduce you to Charley Roper. The love of my life." He went on to recite the little statement we'd hashed out, but then he added, "When we decided to beef up security on this tour we went for the best and Roper Protective Services is it. As I'm sure any of you who cover the circuit would know. A very fortunate decision. It gave Charley and me the chance to reconnect after a long time."

Then the reporters almost stepped on each other trying to get their questions out.

"Are you engaged?"

"When's the wedding?"

"Is that why no groupies are allowed backstage anymore? The band can't be too happy about that."

More of the same, and I let Dallas field all of them with practiced ease. But then voices began to call for comments from me. Dallas looked at me and after a moment I nodded and moved up to the microphone.

"I'm sure you all have every detail of my history by this time," I began, and an easy laugh ran through the crowd. "And some of you know me because you've covered clients of mine. You've always been respectful and I hope you'll do the same today."

"Are you guarding his body yourself, honey?" one reporter joked.

Dallas' fingers dug into me and I knew he was ready to bite back, so I nudged him to keep quiet.

"I'd say that's the best way to do it," I laughed. "Wouldn't you?"

"You can come guard my body any time," the reporter laughed back.

A murmur rose in the crowd as others added to the joke.

Sawyer insinuated himself in front of Dallas. "You might also want to know about the new CD and the single from it that debuted at Billboard's Number One Hot Shot. Oh, and *Take Me Home* is steadily climbing the charts again. It might hit number one for a second time."

"Still going strong for an old man," Dallas told them.

I was thrilled for him. Number One Hot Shot meant the song had hit the top spot right out of the gate. That spectacular sales were expected.

They asked about the releases and the rest of the tour. New songs Dallas might be writing. How much longer he planned to tour. Dallas fielded all the questions expertly, standing there relaxed, his arm still around me. Sawyer Black stood on the other side of him with his artificial smile firmly in place.

Then, as smoothly as if they'd rehearsed it hundreds of times – which actually they had – Mike, his team and some of Matt Genaro's men began ushering the reporters out of the room. They did it so smoothly no one could even become offended.

Mike and Morgan positioned themselves on either side of Dallas and me and stayed that way until we reached the dressing room. Sawyer was right behind me, ushering the record label folks inside.

"Come into the dressing room with me," Dallas whispered, bending down to my ear. "I want to introduce you to these guys."

"Give me one minute. I need to check with Mike about something."

Morgan disappeared into the room with Dallas and the others and I pulled Mike back into the corridor.

"What's up?" he asked.

"The food for the dressing room after the show. I want someone to eyeball it. Jacquie spoke to the caterers and made sure they knew about the peanuts but I want all food checked before it's served."

"What about before the show?"

"I want you to send out whoever you trust the most to get dinner for Dallas and the rest of us. You know he doesn't eat much before a performance. The other night he had a club sandwich. His favorite. That'll do again. And have someone watch when the caterer gets here and unloads the trays for afterward."

Mike raised an eyebrow. "Still keeping an eye out for peanuts?"

I nodded. "Until the tour is over or the killer's caught. Whichever comes first. All the other attempts have failed so he—or she—is going to have to get creative. Someone close to Dallas is doing this and they'd know about his allergy. If it's not Randy we're flying blind." I filled him in on everything I'd learned so far. "Share this with Chase but no one else, okay?"

"Fine. I'll take care of it. But let us know the minute you hear any more from Rick."

"And don't forget the little cooler with his juice."

Then I stepped into the dressing room to meet the crowd.

"There she is." Dallas moved forward and reached for my hand again. "Charley, these are the folks from Azimuth Records. We've been together a very long time."

One of the men stepped forward and shook my hand. "David Olsen, vice president of marketing." He introduced the others.

"We've had a good relationship since I negotiated that first contract." Sawyer, insinuating himself into the mix.

That would have been okay with me under normal circumstances. And Dallas had agreed to let him handle this part of the tour for the remaining dates. But Dallas didn't know what I'd just learned about the man. It took every bit of self-control to maintain a pleasant exterior.

I was doing the polite thing with one of the Azimuth men when my BlackBerry signaled an incoming call. Rick. Oh god. I excused myself and stepped out into the corridor again.

"Tell me you have something," I said urgently.

"I'm here with Lynette," he said. "We're putting you on speakerphone."

"Okay. Let's have it."

"Charley..."

My stomach cramped. Rick was using the tone of voice he always used to deliver very bad news. A client was dirty. Someone had punched out the wrong person. Whatever.

"Just tell me what it is," I said, hearing how weary I sounded.

"I wanted to wait until everything was in motion so here it is. Straight out. We're pretty sure the Dallas Creed merchandise is the conduit being used to smuggle the drugs from Bolivia into the States, and distributed from there."

"Even the CDs?" I asked, astonished. "I thought they'd go right to the stores for distribution."

"We're just talking about the stuff for the concerts," Lynette explained.

I didn't want to believe what I was hearing. "But I've had someone check every shipment when it arrives at the arena, just to cover all bases. We never turned up a thing. How did you find out all this?"

"A good snitch is worth his weight in gold," Lynette broke in. "Lane Hallowell has a source who confirmed that Sawyer Black makes the arrangements with *Angel de la Muerte*. Then Munoz arranges to smuggle the drugs into the States to a central warehouse where all of the Dallas Creed merchandise is shipped and sorted for regional distribution."

"The man is a cousin to Cesar Munoz," Rick added. "He packages the drugs with the merchandise and ships them to the distributors at each tour stop. Sawyer personally supervises the separation of drugs and merchandise at each stop, gets the drugs to the proper person in the local pipeline and the merchandise guys truck the now clean boxes of stuff to the concert site."

"You got all this from a snitch?" I asked.

"I'll tell you, the DEA moves fast. And they must have a judge on standby. Lane had warrants to search the distribution center and Peachtree Arena before I could finish putting this report together for you. He's also getting me warrants so I can officially dig into everyone's bank accounts, including the owners of all the distribution centers."

I didn't know what to say. I just couldn't seem to wrap my mind around the whole thing. Cocaine! How ironic that for too many years Dallas had been a user himself. Cocaine had probably been just part of business as usual for himself and any members of the band and road crew who chose to indulge. This time around there was an announced ban on drugs. Anyone caught using would be booted by Dallas himself.

But still, what would have prompted the attempted kills? It was obvious neither Dallas nor Morgan knew anything about it or they would have gone to the authorities. I was frustrated by the situation Sawyer had placed Dallas in and terrified of the possible outcome.

"So tell me this. After the accident there was a three-year hiatus for Dallas. What happened to the drug distribution during that time?"

"Mild activity only," Lynette said. "Sawyer was managing some midlevel artists and my guess is he used their merchandise as conduits. But the volume wasn't the same. He couldn't ship as much product so he couldn't distribute as many drugs. That's why he was so hot to get Dallas on the road again."

"I'm surprised he didn't stay closer to Dallas all that time," I mused. "Try to get him put back together and out on the road again." And then it hit me. "Morgan was standing guard," I said, almost whispering. "He didn't want Sawyer back in the picture, but for a lot of other reasons. The first chance he had, when Dallas opened the door Sawyer walked right through it and he and Munoz were back in business."

Silence hummed along the connection while we all digested the possibilities that brought to the forefront.

"Morgan looking over his shoulder has to severely cramp his style," I said slowly. "Sawyer's got to be nervous that Morgan might decide to pay a call to one of the distributors just to make sure his brother isn't getting cheated somehow. Maybe decide to be there when the stuff arrives and check it over himself. And hello, packages of coke mixed in with t-shirts. But Sawyer isn't the one who's been making the actual attempts on Dallas. Did the snitch happen to say who that is?"

"Only that it's someone with the band," Rick answered. "We still don't know why they want Dallas dead," he went on. "If no one knew about the cocaine, why kill the golden goose?"

A good question. And then it struck me, a blow that was almost physical in its intensity. I'd provided security for two lesser icons when they toured, men who had unexpectedly died—one in a plane crash, one of a heart attack. Good publicity and merchandising had sent the price of their souvenirs through the roof.

"Dallas doesn't have to tour forever," I said, barely able to get the words out. "In fact he just told Sawyer this is it. Said he hinted at that in the beginning. He's back on top of the heap, bigger than ever. If he dies at this point—better yet, if someone *kills* him—he becomes the eternal icon. The demand for merchandise would only get bigger. Hell, they could devote whole stores to it. This coke distribution thing could go on forever. And I'd guess Cesar Munoz is pushing for this to happen. It gives him a nearly permanent pipeline for his drugs."

"Lane says they had enough to also get warrants to hold and detain Sawyer Black."

"Tonight?" I couldn't believe the timing.

"If he gets a call from anyone, gets wind of this, he's gone, and you and I both know it."

"But right now he has no idea yet we're onto him and we have to get through this show tonight. Please tell the DEA I'll make sure Mike and Chase are on top of everything. Sawyer Black won't slip away."

"All right," she agreed. "I'll call Lane on his cell right now."

"That doesn't identify our actual killer," I pointed out. "Anyone Munoz sent would stick out like a sore thumb. I made sure there weren't any recent additions to the road crew." I nibbled on my lower lip.

"You think it might be this Randy Mueller?" Rick asked.

"Possible, but we've watched him very closely. He's angry but hasn't done anything to make anyone on the team think he's the one."

"Well, it's someone there. You just have to find out who. Maybe when Sawyer's in custody he'll talk."

I snorted. "And maybe Dallas will be dead by then."

"Not with you on the job, Charley."

I felt physically ill. These were people Dallas trusted. People he'd known for years. I wanted to hide in a dark corner and cry for him but I had no time for self-indulgence.

"I have to go. I'll brief Morgan and our guys and we'll all be extra alert. Keep in touch."

I depressed the Off button and called Chase on the radio.

"I need four men down at the dressing room at once. Two of them are to stick with Sawyer Black even if he goes to the men's room. The other two are to be with Dallas at all times as backup for Mike."

"You expecting something to go down tonight?" he asked.

"Just not taking any chances." But that itch in my gut was getting much, much worse.

"Consider it done. We've got enough extra men from your friend Matt Genaro to make it work."

I waited in the wide hallway until the men arrived and repeated their instructions. Then I took a long moment to pull myself together before going back into the dressing room.

"Sorry," I said as brightly as I could. "Just some business to take care of."

I shook hands pleasantly with each of the guests, gave them business cards and finessed them and Sawyer out of the dressing room, two security men stuck to their asses. I locked the door after them and leaned against it.

"Jesus, Charley, you look like someone just died." Dallas was in front of me at once, his hands cupping my face, a worried look in his eyes.

I rested my fingers on his wrists. "Just trying to juggle a lot of projects," I told him. "Nothing for you to worry about." I leaned closer. "If someone would let me sleep at night, it might help."

He grinned. "I'll see what I can do about it, but I don't hold out much hope."

"Listen." I wet my lips. "I have some messages from the office to pass on to Mike and Chase." I looked over at Mike. "Why don't you walk over to the backstage area

with me and I can tell you both at once. These two gentlemen will hang out with Dallas and Morgan."

"You think someone's going to attack me in the dressing room?" Dallas grinned.

"I think I'm not taking any chances with anything." Especially after what I just learned.

"Why don't you tell Mike whatever it is and he can tell Chase?"

"It's just easier if I explain to both of them at the same time. In case they have questions."

He stared into my eyes and I was frightened that he could see the answers written there. "What's this really about, Charley? Does it have to do with me?"

"I promise I'll tell you anything you need to know, okay?" I slipped from his grasp while he was still pondering that, motioned to Mike and opened the door. "Lock this after us," I told Morgan. "And don't open it for anyone else." I stood on tiptoe to whisper to him, "And don't let Todd Mullins into the dressing room under any circumstances. Lie, ignore him, beat him up if you have to. But he doesn't get in."

"You want to tell me what's going on?"

I nodded. "Yes, but later. Right now I have things to do."

"So what's this really about?" Mike asked as we hurried down the corridor.

"It really is better if I tell you both at the same time."

We found Chase hanging with two of the road crew backstage. My people and Matt's had arranged themselves strategically around the arena so there was no area left to chance. I pulled Chase into a corner and gave him and Mike a concise rundown on what I'd learned. I saw the shock on their faces but they recovered quickly.

"I've got two of your men with Dallas right now," I told Chase. "And Mike will be going back into the dressing room in a second."

"I'll make sure everyone's on the alert," he said. "The promoter ordered sandwiches from the caterer for the guys, so we're good on food. And we won't all eat at the same time. Mike, you stick to the boss and Dallas like glue tonight. I'd say these people are getting frantic and with desperate people anything can happen."

Mike nodded. "I agree. We'll be breathing in the same air until everyone's back at the hotel."

"I need to get back to Dallas before he really kicks up a fuss," I told them. "Chase, keep that walkie-talkie on at all times." I sent Mike off to get dinner for the four of us and told him to hurry. When I got back to the dressing room, relieving the two men standing against the wall, expressionless, Morgan looked ready to bite nails.

"Okay, what's the deal, Charley?" he snapped as soon as I locked the door. "I know something's going on and I want answers. Now. I'm the client, remember?"

"My staff is running down some leads we came by, that's all." I made my voice as calm as possible. "And I just wanted to make sure everyone was briefed to be extra-

sharp tonight. I have this itchy feeling that whoever is behind the attempts to kill Dallas is about to make another one."

"And what else?" Morgan demanded.

I looked at him with the same "I know absolutely nothing" expression I always used on my clients when I had information I wasn't ready to share with them. I hoped it still worked.

"And nothing else. Mike has gone to get us food. Then we can all relax until it's time for Dallas to get ready."

"Sawyer knocked on the door," Dallas said. "Pissed because he's got two security people stuck to him like barnacles. Morgan wouldn't let him in and told him to deal with it. He's gone to dinner now with the guys from Azimuth. And his tail. But he'll expect to come back here with them after the show, along with George Bageris and his people."

"Fine. We'll be ready for them."

Dallas laughed, and the sound broke the tension in the room. "Charley, you sound like you'll be standing here with guns drawn."

"If I think it's necessary." But I said it in a teasing manner, determined to keep the mood as light as possible.

My BlackBerry sang to me and I took it out of my pocket.

"More secret calls?" Morgan asked, his tone still edgy.

I looked at the readout. Lynette. "No. Just a text message."

Got hold of feds. Warrants in hand, search and seizure under way. They'll be at arena but won't move until after show. Team leader will look for Chase. Says he knows him. Sorry. Best I could do.

Well, if that was the best she could do, I'd live with it. At least we'd have the concert out of the way.

Good work. Thanks. I'll give Chase a heads-up.

Mike returned with sandwiches for the four of us. Nobody was really in the mood to eat but I knew Dallas couldn't perform on an empty stomach, so we all forced down the food. By quarter to eight Dallas was changed into his stage clothes and Mike, Morgan and I, along with the extra security, walked him to the backstage area. Morgan carried the guitar case, which had never been out of his sight.

Sawyer was there with the Azimuth guys, but they were savvy enough to stay out of everyone's way.

"Full house tonight," he told Dallas.

"Good. Good."

"And there have been very long lines for an hour at the merchandise tables."

"Also good." This time it was Morgan who commented. "I'll be looking forward to the accounting report."

Sawyer glared at him but then turned back to his guests.

I watched Dallas take his guitar case and walk off to a quiet place away from everyone else. He lifted out the guitar and idly picked at the strings. Chase, who had been keeping an eye on the guitar case, moved quietly over to close it and put it down beside him. I knew Dallas needed the last few minutes now to center himself. Get his head into the show. Block everything else out. He'd be shutting out everything around him.

We were more crowded than usual backstage tonight and it made me feel especially antsy. I kept scanning the area, looking everywhere at everyone. Who was the killer? Was he plotting something even right now? A multitude of activities registered as I looked around. Sawyer chatting with the men from Azimuth. Steve guarding the side door to the hallway. Mike and two other team members standing alert and ready to move at a moment's notice if necessary. Dallas tuning his guitar once again. Randy Mueller moving a cable to a different location. Why? I didn't like the way he kept throwing angry glares at Dallas. Roadies everywhere moving equipment, shoving the big cases for the amps around.

Was it my paranoia or did everyone look suspicious tonight? That tickle in my gut told me something was about to happen but what? And from whom? I kept asking the question but no answers echoed back at me.

Scanning the area again. Dallas about twenty feet away on his stool in his own little zone. Todd handing individual bottles of water to one of the road crew for the band members now waiting onstage. Morgan opening the cooler Mike had brought from the dressing room with the juice for Dallas, who usually chugged a whole bottle while he was zoning into performance mode. Todd turning so his back was to everyone else. Doing...what? Something about him wasn't right. He pulled an orange juice bottle from the big cooler and, still with his back to everyone, walked over to Dallas. Uncapped it and held it out. Dallas, preoccupied with his guitar, simply sticking out his hand to take it.

Wait a minute! *Todd* handing Dallas a bottle of juice?

No, no, no, no, no.

And my brain clicked into gear. Someone close to Dallas. A band member or one of the road crew. Who knew his whereabouts at all times better than the road manager? Who could find a way to get to him more easily?

"Don't drink that!" I screamed. "Dallas. Don't drink that juice."

I was barely conscious of moving but I reached Dallas just as he was lifting the bottle to his mouth. Grabbing it out of his hand, I yelled for Morgan. "Put this somewhere safe."

Dallas looked at me, startled.

Morgan grabbed the juice from my hand. "Got it."

"Hey!" Todd shouted. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

"Morgan, cap that juice and wrap it in something. I suspect it's doctored with something. Maybe a drop of peanut oil." I glared at Todd. "You know I've been bringing the juice for Dallas in a separate cooler, so why would you give him this one? And not even from the same cooler as the water you brought for the band. How come? What's in it?"

"It's just a damn juice bottle. Give him whatever you want." He started to ease away from me. "I've got things to take care of."

"Stay right there," I ordered. "You won't be doing anything until I have that juice analyzed. I mean that. Mike! Sit Mr. Mullins down and don't let him leave. If my office is right there's a warrant for him on its way here."

"Charley, what's going on?" Dallas stared at me.

"I'm going to sit down front," Todd snarled, trying to move away, but Mike had his arm in a death grip.

"What's in the juice?" I asked. "What will I find when I take it to the lab?"

"Nothing. Not a fucking thing. Make this jackass let go of me. I have a job to do."

But I could see sudden panic in his eyes and his skin paled. He looked around wildly, as if gauging the situation, then with a tremendous force jerked his arm from Mike's grasp and headed for the stairs. I yanked my gun from my waistband and pointed it at him.

"Don't move," I warned. "I have a gun at your back and I'll use it if I have to. What are you so scared of, Todd?"

He took one tentative step and Mike, moving like lightning, tackled him to the floor, subduing him. Everything had happened in a matter of seconds. I looked around as I shoved my gun back in place to see everyone else staring at me as if I'd lost my mind.

Chapter Eighteen

For a moment the scene resembled a frozen tableau. Sawyer, the Azimuth people, the road crew and the band stood rooted wherever they were, gawking. Dallas, too, had his gaze locked on to me.

Then Todd found his voice. "What the fuck? Let me up, you ass." He was struggling like an enraged wildcat.

But Mike pulled out the cuffs everyone on my team carried, manacled the man's hands behind his back and hauled him to his feet. He shoved him down in a chair against the wall and planted himself right next to him. One of my other men took up a position on Todd's other side.

"Charley?" Mike called. "When did you say our friends from the DEA are getting here?"

"Anytime now." I looked at Dallas. "Did you swallow any of that?"

"No." He had a stunned look in his eyes. "You yanked it away before I could. What's the matter?"

I turned to Morgan. "What did you do with the bottle?"

"Wrapped it in a hand towel and put it in our cooler."

"I'm pretty sure when the lab analyzes it they'll find some kind of poison in it. Maybe even peanut extract, which is just as lethal to Dallas." I looked down at Todd. "Right? You doctored that juice? You must be getting pretty desperate here. What I want to know is why. Why are you trying to kill a man you've known for twenty years?"

"Ms. Roper, what's this all about?" George Bageris, the promoter, finally moved. "Why is this man cuffed? What's the problem?"

"The problem," I said, "is that someone's been trying for days to kill Dallas. Apparently it was Todd Mullins. I'm pretty sure this is one last attempt but I'll know for sure when I get the lab results on the juice." I looked back at Todd. "You, of all people. I just hope you have a damn good reason for it."

But Todd just sat in the chair, sullen.

"Were you involved with the drugs?" I asked him. "Get tangled up too much?" I wanted to tell him that if he gave up Sawyer he might be able to make some kind of deal for himself.

Sawyer. I looked back to where he'd been standing with David Olsen and the others from Azimuth but suddenly he was nowhere to be seen. Damn!

"Where's Sawyer?" I looked at my men. "Who had eyes on him last?"

"I did," Steve said. "He was with the record guys. I looked down for a second and he was gone."

"He can't have left here. I have men on the doors."

"There!" Dave Olsen pointed. "Behind that big black amp case." He started toward the back of the area. "Hey, Sawyer, what are you doing back there?"

It was obvious the manager was trying to hide behind the case, melt into the shadows, but that wasn't what caught my eye. It was the glint of something in his hand caught by an overhead light.

"Gun!" I shouted. "Everyone down. Get out of the way."

I yanked my own from the small of my back and ran toward Sawyer in a crouch. It was obvious now he'd been aiming toward Todd.

"Give it up, Sawyer," I called. "It's over."

One of the road crew standing just off to my left apparently decided to help by shoving the huge case into Sawyer.

"No!" I shouted.

Too late. Sawyer fell backward, the gun discharged, and someone cried out, "Son of a bitch."

Then we had a struggling Sawyer in cuffs and planted over near Todd. I used the bottom of my shirt to pick up the gun and dropped it into the plastic bag Mike pulled out of his pocket.

"You tried to *shoot* me?" Todd lifted his head and stared at the manager. "You fucking bastard. I can't believe you were going to kill me."

"Shut up," Sawyer snarled. "Just shut up."

"Like hell I will. Not now. If I go down, you go with me, old man."

"Keep your mouth shut," Sawyer repeated. "As soon as I get hold of my attorney this will just be a bad dream."

"Hey." One of the Genaro men. "We need a hand over here."

I looked and saw one of the record people—Will Somebody—clutching his shoulder.

"I think the asshole shot me," he said, his face twisted with pain.

Sure enough. And the bullet was still in his arm. I tore his sleeve and wrapped it around the wound. "Hold on just a second and we'll get you to the emergency room."

The man was cursing steadily and I didn't blame him.

"Charley?" Dallas was standing next to me, holding his guitar. "What the hell is going on?"

"In a minute." I unhooked the walkie-talkie from my jeans. "Chase? Have our friends arrived yet?"

"Right here with me." His voice crackled from the small speaker.

"With warrants in hand?"

"Absolutely."

"Please bring them backstage and tell them we have some garbage for them."

"I need some answers right now," Dallas persisted.

"I'd like some too," Bageris added.

"These two men," I pointed at Sawyer and Todd, "have been trying to kill Dallas. And almost succeeded. Probably to cover the fact that Sawyer Black is using the tour as a pipeline to deliver cocaine."

Bageris' eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack. And before tomorrow we'll have all the proof we need."

Then Chase was there with six unsmiling men. The DEA agents. One of them walked over to me and flipped open his badge wallet.

"Lane Hallowell. Glad to meet you, Ms. Roper." He shook my hand and glanced at Sawyer and Todd. "I'll be happy to take them off your hands. I've got all the warrants I need in my pocket." He opened his windbreaker to show me a packet of folded papers in the inside pocket.

"Even for Todd? We didn't know he was the actual killer until a few minutes ago."

"Got it covered." He turned to his team. "One of you read these jerks their rights and get them out of here."

I heard the Miranda warnings being droned then two of the agents muscled the cuffed men down the stairs toward the side door.

"I have something else you should take with you," I told Lane. I took the towel-wrapped juice bottle from Morgan. "I'm willing to bet there's either poison or peanut extract in it."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Peanut extract?"

I nodded. "Dallas is highly allergic. Nearly died once from a peanut butter sandwich."

"Shit! Nasty way to go."

"Tell me about it. I've been keeping the juice for Dallas in a separate cooler that no one touches except myself, Morgan Creed and Mike Donovan. When I saw Todd trying to hand him a bottle from the band's cooler I knew something was wrong."

"Good catch on your part."

I nodded but was still angry and frightened and my pulse was doing a tango. "I'd say the bottle still has Todd's fingerprints on it. He must be really desperate to try this when he knows how I've tightened down security." I gave Hallowell one of my cards that had all my numbers on it. "I'd appreciate the lab results as soon as possible."

"We'll take care of it." He reached inside his windbreaker and removed a plastic bag, dropping the wrapped bottle into it. "One more thing. We'll need to search the

facility. And probably the entire staging area for the merchandise. I promise we'll be as unobtrusive as possible."

I looked at Bageris who had walked back to us and introduced the two men. "This is the man you need to work with on that."

The promoter's expression was halfway between anger and shock but he nodded at the DEA agent. "Let's get out of this area so the band can get itself together to perform. I'll take you wherever you need to go." He led four of the men down the stairs to the corridor.

I had Chase delegate someone to take the injured man to the emergency room and went to stand beside Dallas again, lacing my fingers through his.

"You know we'll need to talk to you, everyone, tomorrow," Lane said.

I nodded. "No problem. You know where we're staying. My men will make sure the band and road crew are available too. But I'd really like to be able to get this concert over with first."

"No sweat." He gave me a half smile. "I'll be in touch. Glad we got here when we did."

"Me too. Thanks." Then I looked at Dallas who was still trying to take it all in. I stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "We'll talk about it all later but right now you have a concert to give."

I could see him pull himself together. Then he squeezed my hand and looked at the band. "What about it, guys? You okay to go on?"

It was Grunge who stepped forward. "We've got your back," he said in a solemn voice. "We're here to do a show so let's get it done." He smiled at Dallas and clapped him on the back.

He and Dallas shook hands as the others in the band murmured their agreement.

The roadie who had been giving the amps a last-minute check came over to me. Short and muscular, he looked young until you noted the lines on his face and the threads of gray in his blond hair.

"Ms. Roper? I'm Howard Molloy. I've been on the crew for fifteen years. I know you'll answer everyone's questions afterward so let me just tell you. I've done the concert notes with Todd before so I can take his place tonight. Look for the stuff we need to pay attention to."

"What do you usually do during the show?" I asked.

"Switch guitars when needed. Make sure the cables don't get tripped over. Someone else can do that."

"All right. Thank you. I think Todd's pad of paper and pen are on the seat he usually saves for himself down front."

"Got it." He jogged down to the corridor.

I turned to Dallas again. "Ready?"

His mouth curved in a tired grin. "Darlin', nothing could stop me."

I gave him another kiss, hard and fast and with as much emotion as I could put into it. The scare tonight had destroyed the last bit of wall around my heart. When I pulled back, I smiled at him. "I love you."

His eyes lit up. "I was afraid I'd never hear you say that to me again. Now I can go out there and kick ass." He looked at the band. "Okay, guys, let's do it."

I turned to David Olsen, Azimuth's marketing vice president.

"I apologize for this," I whispered. "I wish things hadn't come down this way, but I wasn't about to take a chance with Dallas' life." I inhaled and let my breath out slowly.

"Looks like you did a good job." He nodded toward the stage then at Dallas set to make his entrance. "We'll talk after the show?"

"Absolutely."

The musicians took their places and in a moment the first notes of the synthesizer drifted out into the air, the sounds of an organ moaning low. The sound grew and grew as Lavell Hansen layered in note after note. At the top of the swell, when the last note to his part of the intro hung in the air like a musical blanket, the rhythm guitars hit their simultaneous downstrokes, the rest of the band jumped in and they swung into the intro of *Cowboys Do It Right*. The curtains opened and Dallas strode out into the spotlight. The crowd was on its feet, screaming and yelling and clapping. He waved at them, adjusted his guitar strap, and the concert was on.

I was standing in the wings with Mike and Morgan, clapping along with everyone else, when Chase returned.

"Lane and his team have started the search," he said close to my ear. "They had to shut down the merchandise kiosk but they told Bageris he could open again after the concert. They're going through all dressing rooms as well."

"I'm sure Sawyer wouldn't be stupid enough to actually bring the drugs here," I pointed out.

"Maybe not. But there might be traces on some of the goods he handed out. Anyway, we're set."

"Thank you." I felt relief roll over me in waves.

Bageris finally returned and came to stand beside me, repeating a now familiar refrain. "We'll talk later, right?"

I nodded.

"Our boy's doing good out there." I could hear the smile in his voice, the one inspired by a sold-out box office.

"Yes," I agreed. "He sure is." And I went back to watching.

It was magical. There was no other word for it. Everything came together exactly as it should. The band played better than I'd ever heard them. Dallas was so hyped on adrenaline that his energy flowed out with his music and the crowd responded.

It was more than two hours before the curtain came down for the last time and the band filed off the stage. Even as Dallas walked off, dripping wet with perspiration and smiling broadly, the roadies were already breaking down the equipment, getting ready to pack up.

"I sang for you, darlin'." He handed his guitar to Morgan and pulled me into a tight embrace. "Just for you."

"Let's get you to the dressing room," I told him when he finally relaxed his arms. "You need a shower and clean clothes. And we have a lot of people more than anxious to hear what I have to say."

"Not the least of whom is me," he reminded me. "Okay. Let's go."

The atmosphere in the dressing room was a mixture of adrenaline and residual shock. The concert had been outstanding but the circumstances surrounding the evening had been devastating. Chase and his men had politely turned away all callers who'd expected to have a few minutes with Dallas, explaining that he wasn't up to visitors tonight. We'd deal with the media fallout later. And it would be tremendous, I knew that.

Dallas, exhausted by everything, changed into shorts and one of the new t-shirts and sat with his leg propped up on a footstool, an ice cold orange juice in his hand.

"I still can't get my mind around the fact that Todd tried to kill me," he said. "I guess they don't call him Heartless for nothing."

"What do you mean, Heartless? I've never heard him called that."

Dallas grinned but there was no humor in it. "That's because you've never been around when he's working those roadies like indentured servants. They tell him he has no heart. I guess they're right."

"Apparently not just the road crew either." Next to me Chase snapped his cell shut. "That was Lane. When they searched Todd's hotel room among other things they found letters from his wife addressing him as 'Heartless'. I guess she felt the same way."

I grimaced. "According to Rick she always blamed him for what happened to their son and thought he was too cavalier about it. But maybe it was just his way of dealing with it."

"No wonder they weren't all that happy when I brought you on board," Morgan said. "But didn't they think I'd wonder why *they* weren't running to get extra security?"

I shrugged. "I'm sure they would have hired some wannabes who wouldn't really look into things."

Everyone else was milling around still in a state of semi-shock, trying to absorb the story I'd told them in greater detail after the concert was over. Bageris looked bad enough but the Azimuth people looked as if someone had sandbagged them.

David Olsen joined us and I asked if he'd had any word on the man who was shot. I knew the third man in their group had gone to the hospital with him.

He nodded. "They got the bullet out and are keeping him overnight just in case. He'll be fine."

"I'm so glad. I'm sorry he got caught in the situation."

"I don't understand why Sawyer wanted to shoot the road manager. What for?"

"To keep him from talking. Even though Munoz had threatened Todd's family if he didn't keep silent Sawyer wasn't taking any chances. If your guy hadn't spotted him Todd would be dead. Sawyer had no idea the DEA already had a warrant to arrest and detain him. He would have just blended back into the group and thought he was home free. We'd be running in circles looking for a shooter."

"You said they've been doing this for the past fifteen years."

"Yes. Sawyer met Munoz at someone's party and I guess greedy kindred souls connected."

"And Todd? What brought him into it?"

"A very sad story." I told him about Todd's son. "His care is extremely expensive, and Todd's wife spends two out of every four weeks up there to see him every day. He needed money and Sawyer offered him a way to get it. Help him move the drugs around. They planned to milk this tour and then kill Dallas, riding the merchandise bonanza his memory would create and keep their drug pipeline going."

"They dangled enough extra money in front of Todd to get him to agree to do it," Morgan added. "In the end Munoz threatened to kill his wife and son, just to add a little pressure."

"I imagine the media will have a field day with this." David was obviously worried how much of this would spill over to the record label. "Every blogger in the world will pick it up."

I gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile. "I think with the help of your PR people we can do significant damage control."

"At least I can stop wondering who's out to get me," Dallas added from where he sat, rolling the cold juice bottle across his forehead. "I can't believe I was stupid enough all these years not to see what was going on. Of course..."

His voice trailed away. None of us wanted to state the obvious. That he'd been drunk and high so much of the time he probably wouldn't have noticed them if they'd been selling drugs from the stage.

"How about we meet for breakfast and figure out how to handle the balance of the tour," Morgan suggested. "Ten o'clock good for everyone?"

"In our suite," Dallas said. He winked at me. "Charley loves serving coffee."

I had never been so glad to get back to the hotel as I was that night. But at two o'clock in the morning I could still feel Dallas wide awake beside me. I was sure adrenaline was still coursing through him. Usually by now he'd managed to unwind from the heady buzz from the crowd's response. Tonight, however, I figured the

tension over the situation with Sawyer and Todd left him too wired to sleep. He'd be a long time getting over this.

"Can't sleep?" I asked.

"Seems so." He had his arm around me, my head nestled against his shoulder.

"Maybe I can relax you a little," I teased.

He chuckled. "You think you've got the answer?"

I trailed my hand down his stomach, making teasing little circles with my fingers, and his body responded.

"Darlin'." His breathing was suddenly uneven. "I hate to tell you, but what you're doing is not exactly relaxin'."

"Hey. Give me a chance here."

I leaned over him and dotted his chest with butterfly kisses while my hand continued its downward journey, moving closer and closer to his suddenly hard cock. Oh yeah! The stress was beginning to ease. But then I felt his muscles tense again.

"Are you going back to San Antonio tomorrow?"

I stopped the movement of my hand, my fingers still wrapped around his erection. I'd been expecting him to ask me. This was one of the things rattling around in my mind since the feds carted Sawyer and Todd away.

"You're planning to finish the tour, right?" I asked.

"Darlin', can you move your hand for a minute so I can think?" The strain in his voice had nothing to do with what happened tonight.

I laughed. "I don't think so. Answer my question."

"You're trying to torture me, right?" He took a deep breath. "We're winding down to the last of the dates. Morgan's been doing more of Sawyer's role than Sawyer was, anyway. And Howard Molloy can take over for Todd. We can get through it." His hand stroked my arm. "But I still need my personal bodyguard."

"What if your bodyguard has to get back to her business?" I joked.

His hand stopped. "Do you?"

"I don't know." I swallowed a smile. "What are you offering?"

"Let's get married."

My hand tightened reflexively on his cock and he jumped.

"Jesus! Don't maim me. We might want to use that thing again."

"Sorry, sorry, sorry." I loosened my grip.

Married! I knew he'd been working up to it. I just hadn't expected it so soon. Maybe after the tour. After we were back in San Antonio.

Dallas shifted so he could reach the lamp and stared at my face, studying it. "Did I scare you off?" He smiled but his expression was serious.

Did he? Scare me off?

"I told you I love you," he went on. "Tonight you said it back to me. The rest is just details we can work out." He tugged me back down to him. "I'm done with the road, I've got a plan and I want you to be part of it." He told me about his dream. About building the recording studio at the ranch. And a house for us. And how, when I had to go on the road with a client, he could work with Morgan, or use that time to record. Maybe even join me for a few days now and then.

I was almost afraid to hope, but even more than twenty years ago this felt real. We were kids then. Now we were adults with a lot of misery behind us and the new connection felt even stronger.

"Do you really think we can make it work?"

He tightened his arm around me. "Without a doubt. And guess what? Something else is working too."

He rolled me onto my back and nudged my thighs apart. As tired as he was, he was still hard as a rock for me. When his hand found me wet and swollen he smiled.

"You're always ready for me, darlin'. I hope it will be like this when we're ninety years old."

I chuckled, a breathless sound. "We may not be alive by then if we don't start pacing ourselves."

His fingers idly rubbed my clit. And just like that I felt the climax pushing through me.

"No foreplay tonight, Charley. I have to be inside you. Right now."

He reached into the nightstand drawer for a condom, ripped the foil with his teeth and sheathed himself one-handed. I adjusted myself to accommodate him, bending my knees and lifting my hips, and he slid home. Oh god, it felt so good. Bracing himself on his forearms, he looked directly into my eyes as he began the familiar in-and-out rhythm.

"Say yes, Charley," he urged. "Say you'll marry me. I can't be without you, ever again."

I saw desire and passion in those smoky eyes. And something else. All the emotion he felt for me. The love he'd been holding onto all this time.

Say yes. Yes, yes, yes. It echoed in my head.

"I love you," he repeated through gritted teeth. "Damn it, Charley, I can't hang onto this much longer. Say it. Say yes."

I took a deep breath and wrapped my legs around him, pulling him deeper inside me. "Yes. Yes, I'll stay with you for the rest of the tour. And yes, I'll marry you."

"Thank god."

He took my lips in a heated, open-mouthed kiss, pushing his tongue inside, and with a powerful thrust, took us both home.

Epilogue

It was another perfect Texas night. Velvety black sky dotted with crystalline stars. A sliver of a moon hanging overhead. Soft breeze stirring the air just enough to keep it comfortable. Muted voices drifted out from the crowd. The air was charged with energy, as if we'd generated our own electrical storm. I could feel it sizzling all around me and when I looked at Dallas, I saw that he sensed it too.

This would be the Dallas Creed Farewell Concert and we'd all decided the appropriate place to hold it would be here in San Antonio. Practically hometown. The facility had sold out within twenty-four hours of the time tickets went on sale. This time I was watching the show from the wings, not at the back of the arena. Dallas had insisted I be right there and I wasn't in a mood to argue with him. I wasn't really in a mood to argue with anyone, to tell the truth.

Lane Hallowell had called me with a final report on Sawyer and Todd. The damage to the landing gear and the shots from the van had been arranged by Sawyer through Munoz. Todd had been pressured to handle the rest, Sawyer threatening to withhold the funds for the care of his son and Munoz threatening to kill them all if Dallas wasn't dead pretty soon. The DEA had never found anything at any of the distribution centers because Sawyer always warned them and by the time any of their men showed up all the coke had been removed and sent down the local pipelines. All in all a very ugly story. One I was glad to put behind us.

Dallas had finished his tour, the end of road travel for him. Since it was only three more stops I stayed with him, running the office with my BlackBerry, my netbook and Jacquie. Morgan had taken over all management responsibilities and we'd hired Lynette Touhey to do a complete accounting of all of Sawyer Black's operating records. Howard proved to be, if not a Todd Mullins, at least a competent road manager and the dates went off without a hitch. No equipment problems. No rehearsal problems. Everything copacetic.

The record company sent one of their public relations people to handle the media, which was a huge help, since they descended like sharks smelling blood. At every stop the reporters were all over us, but we got through it. Together.

When Dallas announced his plans to the band they all agreed to work with him in the studio and be free to take other gigs in between recording sessions if they wanted to. But many of them were taking advantage of the opportunity to build some kind of home life. Like Dallas, except for Andy, they weren't kids anymore and they'd been on the road a long time. They almost welcomed the change.

Roper Protective Services was busier than ever. It seemed everyone wanted to hire the agency that had thwarted a killer and helped break a drug distribution ring. I'd had

to hire more people and Chase and Mike were busy training them and assuming more responsibility on the road. I, myself, had decided to kick back and work strictly from the office. No more traveling for me. Not the new Mrs. Dallas Creed.

In the past two months we'd managed a small wedding at the ranch, approved plans for a recording studio and a house on land Morgan said he didn't need for the cattle anyway, and were moving forward with our lives. For the moment we were living at my house in San Antonio. When he wasn't rehearsing, Dallas drove to the ranch to oversee construction. After tonight he'd be shouldering part of the ranch operation responsibilities too. And at night we made beautiful, incredible love. Maybe not as frantic as when we'd been younger, but with a lot more meaning.

Two hours before the concert we'd held a final session with the media, again with the record label orchestrating. All kinds of wild stories were still circulating, but I figured after a while they'd have someone else to chase. After the show Azimuth was throwing a huge party for us at one of the major hotels. Then I was ready for the merry-go-round to stop.

I rubbed my fingers over the wide wedding band, still getting used to the feel of it on my finger. Married. I couldn't believe we'd finally made it happen. And I had a wedding present for Dallas. Just a few minutes ago I'd received a phone call and wanted to be sure and share it with him before the curtain went up. He hadn't yet psyched himself into performance mode so I moved up to stand next to him.

"Lane Hallowell called a few minutes ago," I told him. "The government indicted Sawyer Black and Todd Mullins today on charges of drug smuggling. And when the feds get through with them, they'll both have attempted murder charges to face in two states."

He looked down at me and a crooked grin curved his lips. "Thank god for that. I kept worrying somehow they'd weasel out of it."

"No chance," I assured him. "Not with all the hard evidence the DEA racked up."

"What about Munoz? I suppose he gets off scot free."

I shook my head. "Not if Hallowell and the DEA have anything to say about it. They know where his plane lands when he's in the states and they're ready for him. That's a little harder row to hoe but he said they won't be giving up. Oh, and he was the one who put Todd in touch with the mechanic who sabotaged the charter flight to Fort Worth."

"Yeah, I didn't think Todd had that kind of knowledge."

I chewed my lower lip. "I guess I owe Randy an apology. It seems he had nothing to do with this after all."

"I knew that. You just had to convince yourself. Or *be* convinced." He lifted my hand and kissed my fingers. "Anyway, now we have even more to celebrate."

The band members had taken their places and were watching us.

"Ready, Mrs. Creed?" Dallas asked.

I smiled back at him. "Ready, Mr. Creed."

"I love you, Charley."

"I love you, Dallas."

"Can we cut the sappy love talk and get on with this?" Morgan joked, coming up behind us.

We both laughed.

"Sure thing, bro." Dallas nodded to Lavell.

One more time, the beautiful notes of the synthesizer drifted out into the night air, mimicking first violins and then an organ. I could see each of the other band members waiting for the note that was their cue, their bodies vibrating with the energy of the evening. The chords rose and swelled and swelled and swelled. And at the zenith, when the note hung in the air, the two rhythm guitars hit their downstroke, the heavy thump of the bass guitar kicked in and laid down the foundation, the full intro exploded and the curtains opened.

The spotlight hit Dallas when he jogged out onto the stage and the crowd rose in screaming acclamation. Dallas waved to them as the band kept up the intro behind him and he let the yelling and clapping go on because, after all, this was the last time. He slipped the guitar strap over his head and they broke into the upbeat *Cowboys Do It Right*.

Again, when they finished, the crowd was on its feet, whistling and stamping, and Dallas rode it out. When they were quiet again he moved a little closer to the microphone.

"All of you know that tonight is probably the last concert appearance for the band and me. It's—"

He was interrupted by cries of "No, no," from the crowd and he had to ask for silence again.

"I'm not saying we'll never be on a stage again but the days of regular touring are over. I hope y'all will keep buying those CDs and pushing me to number one."

The cheering and screaming rose in volume. I could see Dallas grinning.

"So this is a very special concert and we wanted to do it here, in San Antonio, where it all started, kind of as a gift to you. A thank you." He paused. "Y'all know that I recently got married, to the woman I've loved for more than half of my life." He looked at me in the wings and motioned. "Come on out, Charley. Let the folks see you."

I shook my head and made negative motions with my hands, but Dallas just kept grinning and waving me toward him.

"Better get out there if you ever want to get this show started," Morgan said.

I knew he was right. The spotlight nearly blinded me as I made my way out to the stage to stand beside Dallas.

"I'm going to kill you for this, you know," I said quietly.

He just planted a quick kiss on my lips and gave me a hug.

"Isn't she beautiful?" he called out.

The crowd whistled and stamped and clapped again.

"Thank you, darlin'." Another kiss. "Okay, I'll let you go back and hide now. But don't go far. In a minute I've got something special I want you to hear."

Now what?

I returned to where I'd been standing beside Morgan and Will Gardner, wondering what on earth he had up his sleeve. I knew he and the band had spent extra time rehearsing the past three weeks, so maybe it had something to do with that.

"I wrote this a long time ago, for this woman who lives in my heart," he said into the mic. "But I've never played it for anyone before. It sort of goes with something else. Anyway, here it is. *Love is the Word.*"

The song was a soft ballad, about the importance of the word love and how it bound two people together forever, no matter how many stormy seas they sailed. He played it without the band behind him, just Dallas and his guitar, and for a moment my heart ached for what we'd lost. All those years.

The applause was deafening, the sound shimmering in the air, so intense I could feel it like a living thing. Dallas smiled but he held up his hand, asking for silence.

"Charley and I are together now," he told the audience. "I know y'all are too familiar with our story. I let her get away once, but I'm sure keeping her this time." A ripple of laughter raced through the crowd. "And I've got a new song to sing for Charley. To go with the old one. To celebrate us being together and finally understanding the meaning of that word 'love'. It's kind of a belated wedding present that the band and I have been rehearsing on the sly." He turned to look at me again. "I love you, Charley. This is your song. This is for you. *My Woman, My Lover, My Wife.*"

The crowd went wild again, roaring their approval until he signaled for quiet one more time and began picking out the haunting notes. Very softly the other instruments came in behind him, enriching the melody.

As that whiskey voice drifted out in the words of the song, I stood there with my hands pressed to my lips, tears streaming down my face, and wondered how it was possible to love someone so very much. With the song, we had come full circle.

I was the fool who let you go

The choice I made was wrong

The broken place within my heart

Was empty far too long.

But now you're here I'll keep you close

The well spring of my life.

The one who makes it all worthwhile

My woman, my lover, my wife.

About the Author

I always wonder what readers really want to know when I write one of these things. Getting to this point in my career has been an interesting journey. I've managed rock and roll bands and organized concerts. Been the only female on the sports staff of a university newspaper. Immersed myself in Nashville peddling a country singer. Lived in five different states. Married two very interesting but totally different men.

I think I must have lived in Texas in another life, because the minute I set foot on Texas soil I knew I was home. Living in Texas Hill Country gives me inspiration for more stories than I'll probably ever be able to tell, what with all the sexy cowboys who surround me and the gorgeous scenery that provides a great setting.

Each day is a new adventure for me, as my characters come to life on the pages of my current work in progress. I'm absolutely compulsive about it when I'm writing and thank all the gods and goddesses that I have such a terrific husband who encourages my writing and puts up with my obsession. As a multi-published author, I love to hear from my readers. Their input keeps my mind fresh and always hunting for new ideas.

Desiree welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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