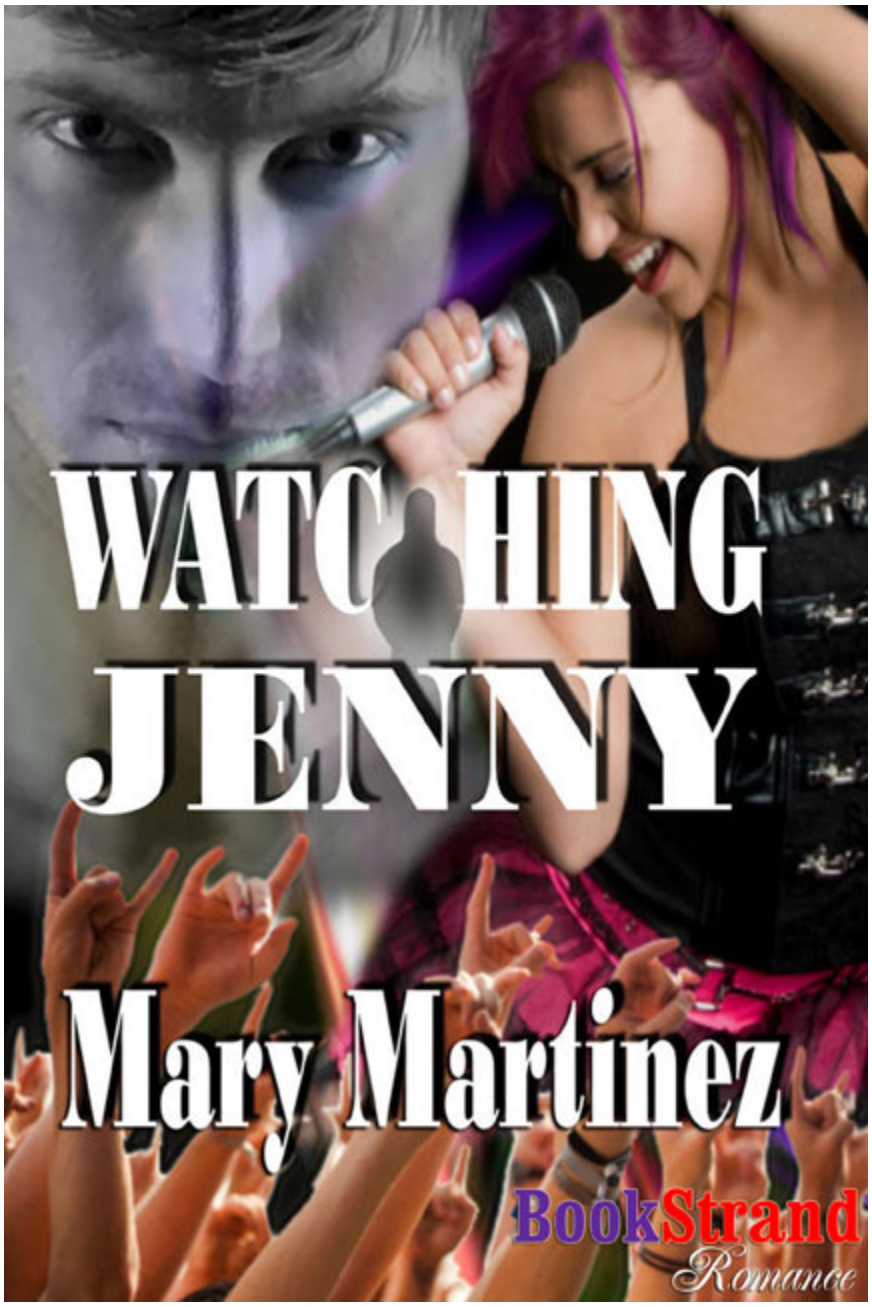
WATCHING
JENNY
Mary Martinez
BookStrand
Romance

Watching Jenny

Known as Blade with wild pink hair, tattoos and piercings, rocker Jenny McGregor works to keep her life private. But her self-constructed barriers are breached after she receives flowers and threatening notes signed by ‘Runner.’

Desperate to stop the threat before she goes on tour, Jenny hires hunky Detective Dan Janson for protection. Unable to catch the stalker before the tour bus leaves, Dan is forced to stifle his attraction to Jenny. As they are carried along on a dangerous game of cat and mouse from San Diego to Memphis, the two draw closer together each day. When ‘Runner’ lures Jenny away from the tour, Dan is forced to acknowledge he has fallen for the feisty singer.

While hot on Jenny’s trail, Dan soon learns ‘Runner’ is not one of the usual suspects.

Genre: Contemporary, Romantic Suspense

Length: 124,516 words

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A SIREN-BOOKSTRAND TITLE
IMPRINT: Romance

WATCHING JENNY
Copyright © 2010 by Mary Martinez
E-book ISBN: 1-60601-591-5

First E-book Publication: January 2010

Cover design by Jinger Heaston
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PUBLISHER
www.BookStrand.com

DEDICATION

Thanks to my family and friends who support my writing addiction.

WATCHING JENNY

MARY MARTINEZ
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Chapter One

Blade paused and looked out into the darkened crowd. A thought crossed her mind. *Is Runner in the audience watching?*

"Ready for your third encore?" Blade's best friend and agent startled her from her reverie.

"Yes, Mar-*tay*!" Glaring at him, she pronounced his name the way she knew irritated him, then felt ashamed. "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap. I'm just not myself lately." She sighed, raised the water bottle to her lips, and took a long, refreshing drink.

Handing the bottle back to the stage tech, she turned to Marty. Trying to lighten the mood and make up for the harsh words, she gave him a half-smile and teased, "You know it would serve you and our fans right if I lost my voice for tomorrow's concert." Before Marty could respond, she gave him a playful swat on the rear and stepped out onto the stage. Pausing for a moment, she let the music take over.

Marching onto the stage, stomping her combat-boot-clad feet, with one hand fisted and raised above her head and the other holding the cordless mike to her mouth, she screamed, "All right!" Then, as she still held the mic, she clapped her hands together above her head. She matched her steps to the rhythm of the twenty-five thousand cheering fans that filled the outdoor amphitheater. Turning as she reached the other side and not missing a beat, she stepped over Tessa, the backup singer making her way across the stage by scooting on her back to the introduction to the song. With long

strides, Blade headed toward center stage.

Blade began to sing the words to her first hit, the one that had brought her fame. She had spiked her short red hair around her face and donned her black leather miniskirt that clung to her hips. She topped it off with a tiny white tube of material barely covered her breasts. It would appeal to her young audience. The usual fake tattoos and piercings on various parts of her body completed the outfit.

The song was full of rage at her lost childhood and the men her mother had paraded through her life. She thought it was a sad commentary that so many of the young people in the audience seemed to identify with her. That's why, as in all of her songs, she included a message of hope for the young listeners. Letting them know that there were people out there who cared and could help. Although only twenty-eight, sometimes Blade felt as if she were a hundred.

Throughout the encore, Blade took turns skipping, running, striding, or marching around the stage, at times stopping to seemingly kiss one of the band members. She always angled her body to give that impression. In reality, it was usually to pull a grotesque face or to stick out her tongue at the lucky person to receive her attention. The audience loved it. She did the same with the women as she did the men, so there was always speculation as to her sexual preference.

It made for interesting press in the rag magazines and was something Marty encouraged to the fullest. He said it was great publicity. Because most of the time it was about someone in the band, everyone took it in stride. It wasn't uncommon to find particularly juicy tidbits hung up around the dressing rooms for everyone to read and comment on. With her life so normal and boring, Blade—or Jennifer Kelly McGregor to those who knew her away from her pop rock fame, and Jenny to close friends—loved to read the gossip, living vicariously through the life the magazine fabricated about her.

With the final strains of music, the group gathered to give their signature concert end. They joined hands, raised them above their heads, and screamed, "We rule." Then jumping and bumping into each other, they exited the stage.

Sometimes, one of them went down and would have bruises in the morning to show for the previous night's rowdiness.

Just off stage, breathless and pumped with adrenaline, the group continued bumping and grinding continued. Members of the band grabbed each other for congratulations on a job well done.

Jimmy, the band's drummer, who was usually shy, grabbed Blade around the waist and pulled her into a playful embrace. "Hey, that was great, Jenny." He gave her a loud, smacking kiss as she wiggled to free herself.

"Enough. You'd use any excuse to get a kiss from a girl." Jenny laughed as she danced out of his reach.

Doug, one of the guitarists, pounced on Bonnie, who was his on-again, off-again girlfriend, when they weren't fighting.

"Hey, if you're going to wash her tonsils like that, get a room so the rest of us don't have to watch," Rich, the lead guitarist, complained.

"Yeah, that's sick, man." Larry was the band's forever man-child. Without taking a breath, he announced, "Hey, let's go to the club. I'm going to pick me up some hot babes."

"Yeah, in your dreams," Jimmy teased.

"If you guys go to a club, you better not be late for practice tomorrow," Marla, Rich's wife and the group choreographer, warned.

"Man, why do we have to practice?" Larry whined.

"Because we have a concert tonight, and I have a few changes. Plus, we have that video shoot day after tomorrow in Mission Beach, remember?" Marla glanced up long enough to glare, then resumed shoving her things into her bag. "Other than the changes I'd like to make, I thought everything went well."

"How early did you want to meet?" Larry slung his strap over his shoulder. "If it's not too early, I can still head over and try to pick up a cute chick."

"I'd like to meet at the studio about nine. I promise I'll keep it to an hour, two at the most. There are only a few changes." There was good-natured grumbling from everyone. In the end, Marla gave in and agreed to a ten o'clock start.

After giving everyone a brief hug, Jenny smiled as she watched her friends walk in different directions to their dressing rooms. Then she turned and went to her room to change.

She was glad the concert was over. Her hair felt stiff as a board, and she couldn't wait to wash it out and take off all of her show ornaments. When

she wasn't rocked out, as she termed it, Jenny left her hair to style itself, short and curly.

Finally sitting in front of her mirror after her shower, with her hair drying in curly wisps around her face, she noticed the beautiful arrangement of exotic flowers. Frowning, she wondered who could have sent them. She reached out to touch the card, only to pull her hand back. She didn't want to admit it, but she was frightened it might be from the same nutcase who had been sending her notes all week. She hadn't told anyone about them, for then she would have to take it seriously, and she really wanted the problem to go away.

"Come on, Jenny girl, show some guts. You have to read the damn thing sooner or later." he had hoped the short pep talk out loud would calm her. After a long moment of indecision, she reached out with determination, grasped the envelope firmly, and pulled it from the ribbon around the vase. Lifting the flap, she closed her eyes and pulled the card out. She didn't realize that she was holding her breath until she read the message and let out a soft gasp.

Peek-a-boo, I see you.
You know, Blade, or should I say Jenny,
after all, we are friends; I really don't think you should walk
in front of your bedroom window, naked, the way you do.
Although you are lovely to look at.
I'm looking forward to your next little show.
Enjoy the flowers.
Runner

This was getting out of hand. She had received a note almost every day. Someone must be stalking her. *They only do that in the movies, don't they?* She would ask Rich if he had seen who had sent the flowers. She walked to the door, paused as her hand touched the knob, then sighed, returned to her chair, and plopped down onto the seat. She might be in danger. *Might be? Who are you kidding, Jenny, you are in danger.* That left only one person to go to so her friends wouldn't be in danger.

Taking a deep breath, she came to a decision. She would call Collette, her mother, in the morning and ask for her help. Collette's latest squeeze

just happened to be the mayor. Jenny was sure that he could pull some strings to keep this situation with the notes out of the press. Blade—although the fans referred to Jenny as *Blade*, it was actually the name of the band—didn't need the publicity before going on tour.

Sighing, she gathered her things, stood, and walked to the door. Pausing for the second time, she looked at the flowers. Then she hurried back; picked them up, and, in a snit, dumped them in the garbage with such force the can fell over, spilling flowers and water over the floor. Normally Jenny wouldn't leave such a mess for the cleaning people, but she was too upset to pick them up. After her little tantrum, she felt better. Picking up the note that had surprisingly escaped unscathed, she finally left the room. The others were waiting patiently for her when she reached the hall so they could walk out as a group to their cars.

"See you guys in the morning." Jenny gave Rich a kiss on the cheek, then climbed into her car. She nodded farewell to everyone after locking her door. She'd tried a service before, but she liked the independence of driving herself. As she backed out, she saw Rich reflected in the lights as he watched her drive away.

She spent the thirty-minute drive home trying to stay alert. She kept her eyes on the road with only glances to her rearview mirror to make sure she wasn't followed. That someone might be watching her was really creeping her out. She parked as close to the elevator as she could, and looked around as she got out of the car. She held her keys between her fingers so she could jab with her fist and stick her key in someone's eye if she was accosted in the parking garage. She hoped all those self-defense lessons would kick in if she needed them.

The walk to her condo from the elevator seemed like one of those movies where the hall kept getting longer instead of shorter. By the time she reached her door, she thought she was going to scream from the tension she was creating in her own mind. She unlocked the three locks, two of them new since the notes had started. She made sure they were all locked again after shutting her door. She dropped her bag on the table by the couch then did a quick walk through each room turning lights on, taking a minute to look in the closets. Only when she was sure she was alone and safe did she relax. Then she felt silly as she realized that, to get in her condo, someone would need her pass card. And her home being on the fifteenth floor ruled

out even the most adventuresome cat burglar.

She remembered the note and went to her bedroom. Looking out her window, she surveyed the scene over the bay. It was a clear night, and she could see the lights from Seaport Village twinkling on the water. That was the reason the blinds were open—the view was spectacular. She tried to see where someone could see in. Sighing, she closed her blinds for the first time since she had moved there.

* * * *

Morning comes fast when one doesn't touch one's head to a pillow until after 2 a.m. After walking blindly to the kitchen, Jenny leaned a hip on the counter to wait for the cup of water in the microwave to heat for her tea. She popped a couple of pieces of bread in the toaster and sighed. She couldn't wait any longer before calling her mother.

"Hello, Collette? Sorry it's so early, but I need to ask a favor." Jenny tried to call Collette as little as possible. The woman may have given birth to her, but so far, she hadn't earned the title of mother.

"Jenny." Collette's thrilled voice vibrated through the phone. "It's so good to hear your voice. It's been too long. Why don't you come over for breakfast and you can ask me your favor?"

"I'm sorry, I have rehearsal at ten o'clock, and I wanted to have this taken care of by then," Jenny replied with a shake of her head, even though her mother couldn't see her. It was just like Collette to try to take advantage of the situation to lure Jenny over.

"Well, I guess we can have breakfast another time. What is the favor?" Collette asked with a sigh of disappointment.

Briefly she explained the situation to her mother, trying to downplay the notes so her mother wouldn't react with hysterics and waste precious time. Jenny took a deep breath and asked for help.

"I thought since your current boyfriend, Ted, him being the mayor and all, has an *in* with the police captain maybe you could get in touch with him and see if he could send someone to find out who's sending me these notes." Jenny knew it wasn't the most gracious plea for help, but it was the best she could do.

"Of course I'll help. However, I think you are taking this too lightly,

which concerns me. I'll make a few calls and then come over."

"I really need to get to rehearsal." Jenny sucked in a breath and counted to ten. "Why do you need to come over? Can't you just tell Ted and he can send someone to pick up the notes?"

"Dear, when I talk to Ted, he'll call Captain Martin. And I'm sure *he* will send someone over. They'll want to talk to you, get the details, and take a look at the notes. I thought you might need someone there for you."

Jenny cringed at the hope she heard in Collette's voice. Jenny would rather have Marty with her. After all, he had always been there in the past for Jenny when Collette couldn't be bothered.

"All right, but I don't want Rich and the others to know. We're getting ready to leave. The rest of the group doesn't need to have something else to worry about, which is why I need to hurry."

"I'll be there within the hour, and I'll explain to Ted you have limited time. I'll see you then." The sound of the connection breaking didn't give Jenny the chance to change her mother's mind.

Realizing that she only had a little while to get ready before her mother and possibly a police officer arrived, Jenny hurried to shower and change. She called Marla to let her know she might be late, but to have everyone start without her. Of course Marla was concerned. Jenny was the one person in the group who was never late. She handed the phone to Rich. Jenny lost a few more precious moments assuring him that everything was fine and not to worry. She just had something to take care of first.

* * * *

Hearing the doorbell, Jenny rushed to answer it. Standing on the threshold was her mother, dressed impeccably as always. Collette's peach suit was crisp, and her silky matching blouse seemed to melt into her delicate skin. Collette was of average height, so Jenny had always assumed she had inherited her own height from her unknown father. Collette was trim, and her hair at the moment was the color of spun wheat. Her makeup looked like it had been applied by an artist. As always, Collette looked like she had just stepped out of a fashion magazine.

"Hello, Collette." Jenny looked behind her mother as she ushered her into the room. Not finding anyone, she shut and relocked the door.

"I'm glad you are at least taking precautions with new locks," Collette commented as she saw the shiny new locks.

"I thought you would have someone with you." Jenny motioned her mother toward the sofa. "Did Ted agree to let me give you the notes so I wouldn't need to talk to anyone?"

"No, dear. He went to visit Captain Martin. I'm sure he is on his way. I wanted to arrive early to spend a little time with my daughter. Is there anything wrong with that?" Collette's defensive tone grated along Jenny's spine.

Jenny sighed as she made herself comfortable in the overstuffed chair across from Collette. She had hoped to avoid the usual dance around their relationship. She wished that Collette would realize that it would take time to build the relationship that had been so badly damaged for most of Jenny's young life. "No, Collette, there is nothing wrong with that. I'm just not very good company right now."

"I'm your mother. I have a right to be concerned about these notes. Why didn't you tell me about them? You probably ran right to Marty and told him."

Jenny knew Collette resented her close relationship with her agent, Marty, and his partner. They had been her surrogate parents almost from the time Jenny had run away from home that awful day thirteen years ago.

Before Jenny could reply, the intercom sounded. Gratefully she jumped up to answer. After assuring the attendant that the officer was okay to send up, she waited by the door to let him in rather than return to her seat to pick up the conversation with her mother. After several minutes the bell rang, and Jenny began to undo the locks for the second time.

On the threshold stood a gentleman, younger than her mother by a few years, whom she had never seen before. Letting him in, Jenny asked him to take a seat. When the officer greeted Collette in a familiar manner, Jenny assumed they were acquaintances. Trying to be polite, she offered them coffee. When both declined, she breathed a sigh of relief, since she didn't have anything but instant.

"Dear, this is Captain Greg Martin. Captain, my daughter, Jennifer Kelly McGregor, or Blade, as the public calls her."

Reaching out to shake his hand, Jenny noticed the skeptical expression on his face. She knew from past experience people expected her to look like

the picture in *The Exclusive*, a rag she currently had lying on her coffee table. In the magazine, Jenny was dressed in her usual concert getup with bright pink spiked hair with little beads on the ends. The caption read, "Are they having a threesome in the band?" The picture showed her with Marla and Rich, her two best friends, arm in arm and kissing Marla's cheek during a concert. *Oh well, let him figure it out himself.* People couldn't believe everything they read. She had other things on her mind than what the captain's preconceived judgment was.

"Nice to meet you. My daughter has some of your CDs. Sorry I can't say I've listened to them." Sitting down, he took out his writing pad.

"Somehow I can't picture you enjoying my CDs. They're more for the younger set. To tell you the truth, I'm a little too old to listen to a lot of our work. That's one of the reasons we're switching gears, taming our music down, so to speak, after this last tour." Jenny smiled at the image of the no-nonsense captain jamming to one of Blade's CDs.

Greg looked at Jenny a bit longer. "I must admit you don't look or seem anything like the wild sexpot I read about this morning. After I received the call from the mayor, I logged on to the Internet to do a little fast research. The only thing I could find in such a limited time was gossip from Hollywood and music links."

Jenny could feel him studying her. The outfit she had on concealed most of her body, which covered all the fake tattoos. She was sure he was trying to see if he could see any of the evidence that he'd read about.

"The mayor warned me you're in a hurry to get to rehearsal, so I'll get this done so you can be on your way. Do you have the notes you've been given?"

Since Jenny had been prepared for this question, she had them sitting on the table by her chair. Leaning over, she handed them to him. She settled into the cushions to study him while he scrutinized the notes. She noticed that he read each one carefully. Jenny could tell he took his job seriously. After the first skeptical glance upon introduction, he had been all business and treated her with respect. He didn't seem to take her case lightly, as if she were overreacting. That fact made her feel better about calling her mother for the favor. Maybe they would get the nut before the group left on tour, and the whole episode would be a bad memory.

A brief knock, followed by the scrape of a key in the door interrupted

the three moments before Marty breezed through. There was no other word for it. With his arms bent, his hands waved hither and yon as he walked, or rather rushed, to Jenny.

"My dear, what's wrong? Marla said you were going to be late. You're never late. Are you sick? Is it something to do with your diabetes?" He straightened as if noticing for the first time they weren't alone. Glancing first to Colette, he gave her a brief, antagonistic nod of acknowledgement.

Jenny noticed the captain's raised eyebrow over the exchange. Then Marty turned to the captain himself and put his hands to the side of his own face, in true Marty fashion. "Oh, what have we here?"

Jenny knew that had Captain Martin been in uniform, Marty would have drooled. She briefly introduced them and then explained the situation. Marty immediately turned and took her hands to pull her to a stand. "Oh, my darling, darling girl. I'm so sorry. Why didn't you tell me about this?" He put his arms around her to give her a comforting hug. It was awkward since she towered over his barely five-and-one-half-foot frame. That's what it took to cause the dam to break. Jenny couldn't help it she let go and cried. He pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and used his other hand to gently push her back down into her seat. Jenny dabbed at her eyes until she gave a final sniffle and got herself under control. Marty sat on the arm of the chair next to her and had his arm wrapped around her.

"I'm sorry. I'm not sure what came over me. Please continue, Captain Martin. I need to go soon." Jenny took a final deep breath. She caught her mother's eyes on her and could imagine her mother's thoughts. *To hell with her*. Marty had been the one there for her when Collette was off with her current flame, not wanting to be bothered with a teenage girl. Of course, now that Collette knew Jenny hadn't told Marty about the notes, she would think Jenny was finally regarding her as a mother and someone she could confide in.

Although Jenny tried her best to forgive Collette, she still had a long way to go. And she wasn't about to open the discussion that would follow if she told Collette she had only called her because of her connection with the mayor.

Jenny turned her attention to the captain. His expression told her that he hadn't missed the interaction between her mother and Marty, and she knew he'd felt the tension in the air since Marty had breezed in. She was sure he

would do a little checking to see what the story was. He wouldn't have to look far. All he had to do was call Ted. She was sure he would.

"After looking through these notes, this person may be someone close to you. Have you given any thought to who this could be?" The captain's question startled everyone and pulled their attention to the matter at hand. "I know you must encounter hundreds of people when you're giving a concert. It won't be easy to find who the culprit is."

"I've been trying to watch people since they began. I thought I would be able to figure it out on my own. That's why I never told anyone. When I received the flowers last night, and the note indicated he knew my routine in my bedroom, I was frightened. I live so far up I never close my blinds."

"Do you mind if I take a look around?"

"No, it's just through that door."

After he left, stony silence pressed in. Marty and Collette had never been civil to each other, and Jenny knew that both found it best to keep quiet when the other was around. She was glad when the captain reentered the room.

"I can see what you mean. I would have closed the blinds also after reading the latest message. If you don't mind, I'll have a team come over and see if they can find anything," the captain said.

"What do you mean send a team over?" Jenny didn't want a bunch of strangers going through her things.

"No one can see into your windows, so it's one of three things—this Runner person is just guessing what you do, he has somehow placed a camera in your room and is watching, or it's someone who has been here during your nightly ritual. What do you know about the members in your band?" He looked briefly at the three of them in turn.

"Everything. We're closer than the majority families. Most of us have been together since high school. Bonnie joined in college. We put ourselves through college with money we earned singing in clubs. None of them would ever do this. And before you ask, neither would Marty or Paul. It has to be the guy is guessing or a camera somewhere. There hasn't been anyone I'd want to spend the night. So no one would know what my routine is." She responded a little more defensively than she'd meant to. He didn't know her friends, and it had been a logical question. Quickly apologizing for her gruffness, she asked him to continue with his questions.

"Who's Paul?" Greg asked.

"Paul is my partner. We've been together over twenty years," Marty answered.

"Okay, I'll make a note of that. For now, I'll look other than the members of your band." Raising a hand before Jenny could comment, he continued. "I have dealt with situations like this since before you were born, and most of the time, in the case of a celebrity such as yourself, the stalker is a zealous fan. However, there are times when the stalker turns out to be someone very close to the person. Let's start making a list of all the people you have had here recently." With pencil poised and ready, he waited for her to respond.

"I don't recall anyone other than my friends from the band—Rich, his wife Marla, Tessa, Bonnie, Doug, Jimmy, and Larry." Then, looking at her mother and Marty, she added them to her list. She briefly explained who each person was and how she knew them.

"You haven't mentioned your father."

The words were met by silence. The captain looked around and waited for an answer.

"I don't know who my father is, and Collette refuses to tell me, so you can mark him off your *list*." Jenny tried, unsuccessfully, to keep the bitterness from her answer.

After clearing his throat, the captain continued. "Okay, that's your band and family. Now let's list all of your personal friends who have come here, lovers, et cetera. A bit of a difficult conversation in front of your mother, I know, but it is important you leave nothing out. That includes one-night stands."

"I would never censor my answers because of Collette, and I gave you a list of everyone who has visited me. Paul and Marty are my parents. At least they have been since I was sixteen." When the captain didn't respond, but sat giving her a skeptical look, she got to her feet, picked up the rag magazine on her table, and handed it to him.

"I believe you are judging me by this person. I may look like this onstage, but that's not me, Jenny McGregor. Blade is just the name of the band, even though most the fans call me by that name—it's as much a costume as my concert clothes. I do not have one-night stands or brief relationships with anyone."

"I apologize for assuming. I've never read this magazine. Thought I've always felt there has to be a thread of truth. Nevertheless, if I've misjudged you, I'm sorry. Since there are no men in your life, are there any women?"

Exasperated, Jenny gulped in air before responding. "No, I'm not a lesbian either. I'm just not in a relationship. I'm a very busy person. We're preparing for our tour. The taping of the music video is set for tomorrow. The next day we pack the motor coaches, and we leave the following day. I don't have time for love or whatever maybe when this tour is *all* over. No, there is no one else to add to your list." Memory smacked her in the head, and she sucked in her breath. "Wait. There was a runner from the agency the other day." She grabbed Marty's hand. "Remember? You sent over the approved list of cities, with the dates and times we will be visiting on tour."

"Oh, that's right. The agency we use is Fast Docs. I'll get the name of the boy and get it to you." Marty reached over to accept the business card the captain offered.

"Are there any others who could have come here? Pizza delivery? Do they have runners for the amphitheater?"

"If I get a food delivery, the front desk calls, and I run down to pick it up. If anyone wants to come to my condo, they have a list of close friends and family who are let up without a call. At the amphitheater, they're not called runners. They're stage techs. They run errands, help with props, et cetera. But I don't recall having any of them delivering anything to me here."

Captain Martin finished by asking a few more questions. He explained that he intended to get a list of the employees at the theater and run a check on them and the runner from Fast Docs. He would have one of his best officers pose as her fiancé, who would stay with her until the culprit was caught. The man would show up for the concert, as if he had been away and he wanted to surprise her with is return. Greg said that he hoped the person responsible for the notes was someone who had only had contact with her recently and wouldn't know whether or not there was a fiancé.

"Whoa, why do I have to have a boyfriend? Can't I just have a bodyguard?" Jenny protested.

"I'm assuming you already have bodyguards when you're on tour and at the concert, correct?"

"Yes, but this would be different. It would be just for me, not the whole

band."

"I don't want to scare him off. So far, you haven't gone to the police. Let's let him think you still haven't. Do you rehearse at the amphitheater?"

"No, we go to a studio in town. We reserve the space so we have it to ourselves. Other than Marty, it will just be the band."

"Good. Take the opportunity to explain to everyone about your new beau and tell them to take their cue from you. After all, they would know your fiancé. Tell them they need to greet him accordingly."

Getting up, he shook her hand, turned to Marty, and advised him to call with the name of the runner as soon as possible. Then he escorted Collette to the door.

"I'm not sure who I'll give this assignment to. It will need to be someone who doesn't have anything pressing," Greg explained as he reached the door. Jenny was instantly confused and gave him a questioning look. "If the perp isn't caught before you leave, my officer will need to take a leave of absence to go with you on tour. Mayor's insistence." He glanced pointedly at Jenny's mother. "That's why it has to be someone who's between assignments." He promised to call the next day to see how the meeting with the *new* fiancé went.

After the door shut behind the captain and Collette, Jenny glanced at Marty and dropped down into the chair she had just vacated. Her legs were too weak to support her.

"Well, what do you think? Do you agree with him? Do you think a stranger posing as my fiancé will go unnoticed?"

"I think it will be a wonderful adventure. Who knows, he could be tall, dark, and mysteriously handsome. Or he could be a huge galoot who will scare any nutcase off." Marty gave a little dramatic shiver at the picture the last had conjured up.

"I'm telling Paul if you flirt with my new fiancé. It may be the only one I'll ever have."

"Darling, Paul knows I love the ground he kneels upon." Marty gave Jenny a smug look. "You could have men crawling all over you. If you ever let anyone get close. And you know it. But we won't go there today. I don't have the energy for the argument that would follow. We need to go. I'll take you to rehearsal. I want to see how things are going for the video tomorrow. Run and get your bag."

* * * *

When the two arrived, forty-five minutes late, complaints flew. All were worried they'd need to start over again. Jenny promised that she would go over what she had missed with Marla later and they could continue from where they were. Before they resumed practice, Jenny called for a short break, laughing when everyone blamed her for being lazy. She let Marty explain the plan for that evening and the need for everyone to play their part. The hope was to have it resolved before they left on tour.

"Why didn't you tell us, Jenny?" Jimmy's voice held a thread of hurt. "You know we always share everything, the good and the bad."

"I was hoping it would all go away. You know, whoever was sending them would get bored." Jenny raised a hand to stop any comments before she could finish. "I know it was dumb of me, but we've been so busy, I really just didn't want to deal with it. And I thought it was just a young fan. Sorry, I promise to keep all of you in the loop from now on. After all, that's what families are for, right?"

"Exactly! You need to remember that, not us," Bonnie admonished. She was a lanky brunette, the closest one to Jenny's height.

More questions and admonishments followed after Jenny finished answering all of their questions and assuring everyone she wouldn't try to tackle the situation on her own. Her friends agreed to treat her new beau accordingly, and Jenny could see the little wheels turning behind a few of their eyes—the boys in the band were going to take advantage of the situation to play some tricks on the new guy. Hopefully, the police officer came equipped with a good sense of humor.

Finally ready to resume practice, Jenny noticed Rich and Marla over in the corner talking quietly, smiling in the intimate way they had with each other. But something was different. She decided to keep an eye on them for the next few days to see if she could put her finger on the difference. Then Marla turned and smiled at Jenny when she caught her gaze. She started toward the center and called everyone to gather to begin.

"Okay, let's start working on 'I Don't Know.' I'll go over the other song with Jenny later. Jenny, right before the instrumental, when you sing the 'I don't know' three times, start making your way to center stage so at the end

of the three you are center. Tessa, Bonnie, and I will make sure we are behind you at that point. Then what I want you to do…" Breaking off, she pursed her lips in a thoughtful manner, then turned to Jenny. "At the concert tonight, do you think you could do this song with a headset? It won't be the first song. You should be into the concert by then."

It wasn't a secret Jenny had a problem with stage fright, but no one made fun of her. They just worked around it. To help combat it, she liked to carry her cordless mic so she had something to grip in her hands. When she didn't, she tended to have her hands fisted the whole concert.

"How far into the concert?" Jenny thought of not having her safety net, or in her case safety mic, and her tummy did a queasy flip.

"It's toward the end." Marla looked at Rich again and gave him a smile, which had nothing to do with rehearsal. A smile Jenny noticed and mentally filed away to mull over later.

"Okay, I'll set the mic down after the previous song and use the headset for the rest of the concert. How's that?"

"Great. Little by little, we'll have you weaned from your prop. After all, it looks like you're not up to the twenty-first century yet when you use a mike."

"I'm making no promises. The natives are getting restless."

"Right. Rich and Larry will be on either side of us during this part. During the bass solo, I'll have Larry move to the front, but for now, they'll be on the sides. When it starts, we will be center, with you, Jenny, at that point. I will be on Jenny's right, and, Bonnie, you are on her left, just a few steps behind. Tessa will be directly behind her a few steps back from us, in the shape of a diamond. Once in formation, everyone will raise their arms above their heads with the beat. Then, with your fingers in a peace sign, walk forward toward the audience. Do it with an attitude, with hands bouncing at the wrists in rhythm with your steps. Let me show you. Guys, give me a few bars." Marla began to demonstrate, and from there the rehearsal flew by, and before they knew it, half the day was gone.

Finally calling a halt so that everyone could go home to get ready for the concert, Jenny happened to catch another look between Rich and Marla. Deciding she didn't want to take the time to ponder it, she came straight out and asked. "Okay, you two, what's up? If I didn't know better, I'd think you were on your honeymoon or something with all the dreamy looks being

passed back and forth." The others lent a chorus of their own observations.

Rich took Marla's hand and gave it a tug until she was at his side. He placed an arm around her shoulders. With her hand still in his, he placed their joined hands over her tummy. A wave of envy washed over Jenny as she watched him smile down at his wife, when she nodded he lifted his head and grinned.

"We have an announcement. We're going to have a baby!" After all the cheers and congratulations died down, Jenny invited everyone over to her condo for a late lunch and celebration before the concert.

"I'll break out the champagne I've been saving for a special occasion. I'll stop on the way home to pick up something nonalcoholic for the mother-to-be." With a time agreed upon, they all left to run their various errands, leaving Marla to go over what Jenny had missed earlier. Marty, who had stayed to watch, excused himself, saying he was going to the closest Babies "R" Us so he could shower them with gifts this afternoon. After all, he was going to be an honorary grandpa.

Chapter Two

Things were hectic as usual at headquarters, just how Dan liked things. He loved the atmosphere of good-natured camaraderie. He listened to the chaos around him as he worked on the paperwork from his last case.

"I ain't done nothin' wrong, Officer Asshole."

Dan looked up to see a lady, if he dared call her that, in a short red dress yelling obscenities at the officer trying to lead her toward the holding area.

At least it's never boring. Dan smiled to himself. Just then, he heard his name being called. He glanced around to see who wanted him. It was the captain. In no hurry, he stood and strolled toward the office, stopping to joke with the other officers on the way.

"Am I bothering you, Janson? I've got better things to do than wait all day for you."

Creasing his brow, Dan wondered what the hurry was. He and Greg were closer than most, almost like father and son. But Greg couldn't afford to treat him any different from other officers. Dan guessed that he was acting put out at the delay. In reality, he didn't think that Greg really minded being kept waiting.

"Sorry, what did you need? I assumed it was just about the barbecue day after tomorrow. You know you've been trying to find out who I'm going to pick on my fantasy football team since you set up the time and date for the draft." Taking a chair, he sat and waited for his best friend and mentor to tell him what had him acting so official.

"I have an assignment for you. It could last a day or two or drag out for a while. Do you mind traveling, if it comes to that?"

"I'm intrigued. Tell me *all* about it."

"We have a musician who has a stalker. Her stage name is Blade. Have you ever heard of her?"

"Isn't she some kind of pop rock singer? I remember something about

her from a rag I saw at the store the other day. You want me to be a bodyguard?" He didn't know whether to be insulted or not. He was an officer, not a babysitter.

"No. Well, sort of. I want you to investigate the people around her, but yes, I do want her guarded. The only person who has been to her apartment, other than friends and family, was a delivery person from Fast Docs. I talked with him earlier. I've put him to the back of the list. I think it's someone close to her. Although she refuses to even consider the possibility it could be a member of the band." Greg's focus rose above Dan's head to a spot somewhere over his left shoulder. It was a habit of Greg's while he thought cases through. Dan knew he needed to wait it out before more information would be revealed.

His gaze and attention returned to Dan. "Could be a stage crew person, I guess if I'm to be politically correct, a stage tech. Anyway, they're leaving on tour in a couple of days. If it's not resolved by then, you'll be going with them."

"What? I don't want to travel around with a bunch of pop rockers. They're probably all on drugs and throw wild parties. How am I supposed to blend?" Dan looked down at himself as if it would solve the puzzle for him; he wore ordinary jeans, a T-shirt, and boots. What in heaven's name would he have to wear to fit in?

"I'm hoping it won't come to that, but I think you'll be surprised when you meet Jennifer McGregor. Why don't you go get us some coffee, and I'll fill you in on my plan."

Dan returned to the office with two cups of steaming coffee, or the office equivalent, since it tasted like no other coffee in the world. The only thing good about it was that it was so full of caffeine it could keep you awake for days. For that reason alone, Dan steered clear, unless he was pulling an all-nighter, which it sounded like this assignment was going to be.

"Okay, why did you honor me with this assignment? You have a dozen young officers who would jump at the chance to guard Blade, or whatever her name is." Dan sat down, then winced when he took a sip of the most god-awful coffee he'd had in a long time.

"I'll admit I didn't think of you at first. I had thought the notes were just from some young fan, but when I read them, I decided I needed an

experienced officer. Besides, you're in a rut. You come to the station, do your job, and then you go home and do whatever it is you do there. You never hang out with any of the crowd anymore. You have no life, and if nothing else, I'm hoping it will shock you into living again. This case will force you to use your brain. It or Ms. McGregor will keep you on your toes. You won't be able to run on autopilot as you have been. I'm not saying you've slacked in your duties." Greg took a deep breath to continue before Dan could try to interrupt him.

Dan sighed. Greg was on a roll. There was no stopping him once he started.

"You haven't been yourself since Sarah. I know you went through hell and you still grieve for her and your son, but it's been five years. It's time to put it behind with your wonderful memories and move on. I'm not saying these things to hurt you. I'm concerned about you. I don't want to see you live like this the rest of your life. And besides, I must admit to being surprised, but I like Jenny."

"Gee, thanks, Dad." Dan said sarcastically. "You think following a bunch of pop rockers around is going to make me forget Sarah?" Angry, he stood and paced to the window. He knew his friend meant well, but Dan didn't need anyone to tell him how to live.

He was never going to get involved in a relationship again. It left him too vulnerable. There were plenty of women out there when he wanted one, willing to assuage his needs with no strings attached.

"I'm not stupid enough to think you could ever forget Sarah. I'm saying it's okay to remember her in your heart, but it's time to move on. There *is* another woman out there who can make you happy and give you a family. You probably won't find her on this assignment. But I'm hoping it will let you see there's a whole world out there to explore. I know it won't do any good to argue about it. So let me just outline what has happened so far, and then you can be on your way."

Dan realized it wouldn't do to argue. "Don't get your hopes up, Greg. I'll do the best job I can, as always. This won't change anything. I'll find out who this nutcase is. Then I'll settle back into my same rut. What do you want me to do?"

Greg explained what he had found out that morning and showed Dan the notes so he could compare them with any new ones. He finished by telling

Dan what had been arranged for that evening at the concert.

"By the time you get back from getting your gear together, I'll have your backstage pass, your front-row ticket, and a packet with pictures of the individual band members and anyone else close to Ms. McGregor. Do you have any questions?"

"Several." Dan ran a hand through his unruly hair. "How will you handle the arrangements if I have to go on tour?"

"You'll be put on extended leave—"

"What? I have a mortgage to pay. I can't just go without my paycheck."

"No problem there. Since Jenny is about to be the mayor's stepdaughter, he's footing the bill."

"And jurisdiction? Are you forgetting that little minor problem?" Dan felt he had finally come up with a reason he wouldn't be able to follow the band on tour.

"I'll get an itinerary from their agent. I'll contact the police captains in each town and apprise them of the situation."

"Well hell, sounds like you've got all the bases covered."

"Yes, I do. Any more questions? You need be on your way if you're going to be ready."

Dan could tell Greg was trying not to laugh. "Yes, how is she going to know who I am? After all, you've decided we're going to be lovers, not that it's anything new for the young lady. I'm sure she has one in every town."

"I didn't say anything about being 'lovers.' I said you would be posing as her fiancé. Don't make the mistake of believing everything you read about Blade. However, to answer your question, her agent will let her know where you're seated during the concert. Then after, when you go backstage, she'll recognize you. The rest of the band has been told to treat you as if they know you. Along with the pictures, I've added the information about each member and her surrogate parents, her agent and his partner, so you'll know them. Now, you've got a lot to do in a couple of hours, so off with you."

Dan left, promising to be back in an hour for the packet. As he walked out to his car, he had a feeling his life was about to change. He couldn't put his finger on why he felt that way, but he did. He liked his life just the way it was. There were no complications. He didn't answer to anyone. He was lonely sometimes, but not often.

He had been married once. He'd been happy. His wife was expecting their first child, a boy, and all had been right with his world. Until the unthinkable had happened—he'd lost both.

He'd taken a second job, thinking the extra money would come in handy with the new baby. How he wished he'd stayed home. He would have been there to prevent the accident. He still felt guilty. He always would. The next day would mark the fifth anniversary of their deaths. Dan wondered if Greg remembered. He probably did and was thinking by keeping him busy he would get through the day easier. Maybe he was right.

At home, he looked around his house and threw what he thought he needed in a bag. He only took enough for a few days. If he ended up going on tour with them, he would need to return. Just then, Eddie came bounding in through the dog door in the kitchen, always happy to see his master. He jumped on Dan.

"Hey, Eddie, I'm happy to see you too." Dan laughed and took the mutt's paws from his shoulders. Once the dog had all fours on the ground, he took a moment to scratch Eddie behind the ears. Too bad he didn't have time to play. He went to the cupboard for dog food, and as he did so, he realized that he hadn't thought about Eddie and who would feed him. Well, this was Greg's big idea. He could just come over and take care of the dog for a few days. If he went on tour, he would find a good kennel for him, one that didn't put the dogs in cages.

Heading back to the station, he thought over the information Greg had given him earlier. Tonight, he would meet the band. He decided that he would check out all the band members, even though Blade, or Jenny, as he better start thinking of her, felt they were family. He would watch for any suspicious behavior from the band and from the stage techs. Back at the station, he climbed from his car, satisfied with the plan he had devised.

The captain was in his office talking animatedly to someone on the phone when Dan entered. Greg looked up at him and motioned him to sit. Not really listening to the conversation going on, Dan noticed the rag with Blade's picture on it that he had seen at the grocery store.

He picked the magazine up to thumb through it. Coming to the story about his new *fiancée,* he read, and sick feeling rolled through his chest. Unfortunately, the article fueled his preconceived notions of what the singer and her band were like. As he had feared, he was going to be guarding a

young lady with little or no morals, and looking at the pictures, he could imagine she participated in wild orgies and drugs.

Greg had hung up the phone, and Dan watched as he walked over. A minute later, the magazine was pulled out of Dan's grasp, and Greg bent his head to read what Dan had been.

"Yup, pretty trashy stuff. I know when I read this I thought I knew all there was to know about Blade. Then I met Jennifer McGregor and found there's a lot more than what's in this magazine. Just remember, ninety-nine percent of the time, these rag magazines are pure fiction." Greg handed the magazine back to Dan. "I'm not going to say more. It might be fun watching you figure things out for yourself."

Dan threw the magazine back on the table where he'd found it. Ignoring Greg's words, he said, "Well, I better get going. I wouldn't want to be late for my fiancée's concert, now would I? By the way, what am I supposed to do with Eddie? I can't be running back and forth to take care of him." Dan picked up his things to leave and then stood by the door waiting for Greg's answer.

"I thought I'd drive by and pick him up. Tommy would love to take care of him for a while. You know my son will have a lot fun with Eddie."

"Well, okay. Just keep him away from your Trixie, vicious little thing that she is." Dan was thinking of their dog. Greg's wife, Marcie, wouldn't let them have a real dog, so they had to have a mouse of a dog, a white Maltese, and the only good thing about it was it didn't shed or yap.

"Trixie is not vicious, and you know it. She wouldn't hurt a fly. If anything, she'll have to hide from Eddie. He could swallow her whole," Greg argued.

Dan knew Greg was only kidding. He had brought Eddie over several times, and the two dogs actually got along famously. Because Eddie was a big Malamute, everyone had been surprised at first. However, Eddie seemed to think Trixie was his little sister or something and needed his protection.

"Okay, here are my spare keys. I'll call you later to let you know how things go. How long does this concert last anyway? I don't want to call too late. Marcie will shoot me."

"I think they only go a couple of hours. Since it starts at eight, it shouldn't be too late to call. It's a Friday night, and we usually stay up watching movies with the kids."

"Okay then, talk to you later." Dan walked out the door before he could break down like a baby and beg Greg to put someone else on the case. He really wasn't ready for a change.

Chapter Three

Precariously holding three pizza boxes, Jenny tried to open the door but couldn't get the key in the lock. Suddenly the boxes were lifted out of her hand. Startled, she turned with a little squeal to see Jimmy standing behind her holding the pizza.

"Hey, I had to save the food before you dropped it. I'm hungry."

"You scared me. Sorry, didn't mean to scream in your ear." Jenny finally got the door unlocked. Since this Runner business had started, it seemed she jumped at her own shadow.

"Just put the pizza in the oven on low so it'll stay warm until the others get here," Jenny instructed.

"If I have to. I was thinking I'd just eat it myself and we could order more," Jimmy grumbled as he headed off toward the kitchen.

"You're not going to starve to death. Quit acting like a martyr." Jenny decided to change the subject away from food. "Are you ready for the taping tomorrow? I have some ideas about the video. I'm hoping we'll be able to brainstorm, then tape, and get out of there early. I've got some things to do before we leave on tour."

"I've got some ideas too. Let's just celebrate the baby tonight and talk shop tomorrow, deal?" Jimmy asked as he walked back into the living room.

Jenny gathered her packages from the hall floor where she had left them while trying to unlock the door, and placed them on the coffee table. When she finished, she looked up. Knowing the drummer as she did, she wasn't surprised—he seemed to be a bottomless pit.

He was already eating a piece of pizza. "Sorry, I'm really hungry."

"Couldn't wait, could you? I swear you're always eating. How do you keep the weight off?"

"Just lucky, I guess. My mom keeps telling me someday it's going to catch up with me and then I'll be sorry. She's jealous because she's always

on a diet."

"I'm jealous too. I wish I could eat anything anytime I wanted." Jenny could eat like a horse and not gain weight, but she was a diabetic and so had to watch her diet closely. The bell sounded, breaking into her thoughts.

Jimmy went to the door since he was closest. "Hi, guys, come on in. Did you all ride together?" He opened the door wider to accommodate everyone as they came in dropping off packages to join Jenny's on the coffee table.

"I hope you saved some of that pizza for the rest of us, Jimmy," Marla said as she sat on an overstuffed chair, smiling up at Rich as he sat on the arm.

"This is my first piece, honest. Ask Jenny." Jimmy dropped to the floor and leaned against the side of the couch.

"To answer your question, no, we just happened to arrive at the same time, and we saw Paul and Marty pulling into the garage as we got on the elevator, so they'll be up shortly." No sooner had Bonnie said this than the bell rang again. Only this time, the door opened before someone answered it.

"Hi, everyone." Marty lumbered in under his burden of packages. Paul followed with twice as many.

"What did you do? Buy out the store?" Jenny asked as she directed the men to stack the packages on the floor since the table had no more room.

"Well, I've never been a grandpa before, so I brought the parents-to-be a few things they're going to need." After putting everything down, Marty made the rounds, giving everyone hugs and kisses. The men tolerated it because they knew that with Marty, it did no good to protest. So, stoically, they let the man give them each his customary peck on the cheek. Paul followed, greeting everyone, limiting his kisses to the women and handshakes for the men, and smiling fondly at his mate of more than twenty years. Marty cried openly as he gave Marla a hug and patted her still-flat belly.

"Oh, darling girl, I'm so excited for you. To be a mother must be the most precious thing in the world," Marty said as he wiped his eyes with his handkerchief.

"Yes, it is. Rich and I are very happy, and we think you are going to be a great-grandpa. You also, Paul. Now, the pregnant lady is hungry. Let's eat."

For the next little while, there was chitchat as everyone gobbled the pizza and licked their fingers to get every last string of cheese. When the pizza was almost gone, Jenny slipped into her storage room and came out with a couple bottles of champagne. Grabbing the sparkling cider she had picked up on the way home, she went to the kitchen. After placing the filled glasses on a tray, she handed them out, making sure the cider went to Marla. She waited for the group to settle down, then gave her toast.

"I want to congratulate Marla and Rich on their good fortune. I would like to make a promise to be the best aunt ever. This baby will have the best of everything. I'm sure I speak for all of us." With the chorus of agreement, everyone took a sip.

"Marla, Rich, I know we're here celebrating your good news. With the tour coming up, this may be the only time I have to share my good news also. I hope you don't mind," Tessa said when everyone had finished congratulating the happy couple.

"Tessa, you know we don't mind. What news do you have to share with us?"

Taking the hand of her boyfriend, Todd, who was almost like a member of the band since he was a permanent fixture backstage at every home concert, she stood up and pulled Todd with her.

"Todd has finally decided to make an honest woman out of me. He got the engineering job he wanted. He will be traveling a lot the next six months, but with us on tour, it works out well. When we both get home, we're going to get married. Everyone better plan on being in the wedding party." Another round of champagne was poured, and more toasts were made to both couples.

Then someone noticed the time, and it was declared if Marla didn't open her presents soon, they would be late to their concert. Opening the last package, she gasped when she saw the beautiful bassinet Marty and Paul had given them.

"It's beautiful. I don't know how I'm going to thank everyone. I'm overwhelmed with all the gifts, especially since we made the announcement today and you all went out and went wild. Thank you." With tears running down her face, she stood and walked around to everyone to give them a hug. Rich followed his wife, thanking and hugging.

"Guys, we better get going. There are a few things we need to discuss

before we leave. I hate to put a serious note into the festivities, but here goes," Marty said. "Captain Martin called this afternoon. He told me he had handpicked an officer to take care of our Jenny and her situation. His name is Dan Janson. He's an undercover agent and is very good at what he does. As we told you earlier, everyone is to greet him as their long-lost cousin, or in Jenny's case, long-lost lover."

"How am I to do that if I don't even know what he looks like? Do you have a picture?" Jenny asked as she started to clear the plates away, then put them back down deciding to clean up when she got home later.

"I gave him a ticket for the center seat on the front row and a backstage pass. That way all of you will be able to see him during the concert."

"It's going to be dark. How are we going to see him?" Jenny asked.

"The stage lights are up when you first go out. That's when you need to look. Plus, you have that crawly thing Marla's having you do. Doesn't that take you directly front and center?" Marty asked. "So you'll have plenty of opportunity to see him. When he comes backstage, all of you will know who he is. As of now, everyone is suspect. Although Jenny has told the captain none of her friends and family would do this, the captain is concerned because sometimes the person we least expect is the culprit. Until eliminated as a suspect, every person is a suspect.

"Personally, I agree with Jenny, but I also agree with the police. They need to do their jobs the way they know best. The ultimate goal here is to keep everyone safe. Please cooperate with Officer Janson. Get him any information about yourself that he asks. The sooner he eliminates all of us, the sooner he can concentrate on catching the real culprit." Marty gathered his things together and then turned back to the group. "Everyone knows where the shoot is tomorrow, correct? And the time?"

"Yes, we're to meet in Mission Beach at the Coaster," Jenny answered for everyone.

"Hey, why don't we have breakfast first? Let's get steak and eggs at the Coaster Saloon, across from the Coaster. We could have Bloody Marys. What do you say?" Bonnie asked as she picked up her purse and walked to the door.

"I second the breakfast. What about eight, since the shoot's at nine?" Jenny agreed.

Doug, the keyboard player, echoed Bonnie. "I second the Bloodys."

Jenny watched Doug trail Bonnie to the door. He loved Bonnie, and most of the time, Jenny thought that Bonnie loved him. They had a very passionate relationship, and they broke up at least twice a month. It had become routine, so everyone just let them work it out and ignored the situation. Their fights could be deafening, as could their lovemaking, which could be embarrassing when traveling in the same coach on tour.

"I don't think anyone needs to have Bloody Marys at eight o'clock in the morning before a video shoot. It will be tomato juice for everyone," Marty announced, to a chorus of disappointed sighs.

* * * *

After everyone had left, the condo seemed quiet. Looking at the clock, Jenny guessed she had time for a shower, though she didn't really need another one, before heading to the theater. She knew the hot water would help her to relax and calm her stomach. Usually it was just the before-concert jitters. However, she had more to be nervous about. Tonight, a new fiancé would be entering her life. It was only for show, but the man, a man she had never even seen before, would be living with her. She had never lived with anyone, other than her mother, foster parents, and Marty and Paul. As soon as she could afford it, she had moved out and had lived on her own.

She had grown up watching her mother with men. She had never wanted a relationship. In her youth, her mother would leave her alone while she went out with men. When she came back, there was always money for food and other things, mostly drugs. Jenny had grown up to believe that all men were scum. Monthly visits to Dr. Graham, her counselor, had helped her realize her error. She now understood there were good men, ones who were faithful to their wives and didn't abuse them. However, Jenny didn't think she would ever find one—hence, she steered clear of all relationships.

Since she was turning into a prune, she decided she had stewed enough about the situation and stepped out of the shower. She pulled on her sweats, as she always did for a concert. She hated going out in public dressed as Blade. Although Blade was a part of her, she had long outgrown the clothes and style she had to wear to maintain the image.

Looking in the mirror, she decided the fake tattoos were still good, so

she would rub them off after the show. She tried to make them last at least two concerts. After throwing her gear into her carryall, she looked around the condo to make sure everything was locked, including the windows. She realized that was a little paranoid—after all, only Spiderman could get into her fifteenth-floor condo. Surveying the living room as she went to the door, she shuddered at the mess left to be cleaned up later. Oh well, she didn't have time now. She closed the door firmly behind her, then locked all three locks.

Even though she had parked close, she still stopped by the garage attendant's desk to ask if he would walk her to her car. The young man jumped at the chance. He hadn't hid the fact he'd had a crush on her since he started his job. He was so excited he chattered all the way to her car. He turned bright red when she reached out to lightly touch his hand and thank him. As she backed out of the stall and left the garage, she could still see him standing in the same spot watching her.

Jenny smiled most of the way to the theater until she thought about the fact the attendant knew her comings and goings. She briefly thought she ought to mention him to her new bodyguard, then discarded the idea. The boy was too genuine and flustered when he was around her.

"Okay, Jenny, you need to be careful, but don't start thinking everyone may be the note culprit. Let the police, who know what they're doing, do their job." After her little lecture to herself, she felt better. Walking into her dressing room a few minutes later, she felt almost ready for her concert. She missed Martha, their makeup artist. She was away spending time with her family before the group went on tour. They were all on their own to get ready. At least she'd be at the video shoot. A knock on her door interrupted her thoughts, and she turned to find Marty already walking in.

"How are you doing, little girl?" He crossed to her and folded her in a huge hug.

"I'm okay. I have my usual jitters about the concert, and I am a little nervous about meeting the man who I am to pretend to be in love with." Jenny backed out of Marty's arms, picked up her bag, and walked to her dressing table.

"That's only natural. Love is scary enough when it's real. It can be worse if it's only pretend. You're made of hard steel underneath all that soft fluff. You'll get through it fine."

"I am not soft fluff. My fans can attest to that. Marty, tell me, how am I supposed to act with this man? I guess I had better start using his name. How am I supposed to pretend to love Dan? I've never been in love—I don't know how it feels. How am I supposed to act?" She was looking at Marty's reflection in the mirror and talking as she automatically applied her makeup. She used a lot of loud makeup to promote her rock persona. The wilder, the more the fans loved her. She was here to entertain, and her fans deserved the best.

"Let him take the lead. Just *be* yourself, and you'll be fine. It makes me sad you don't know the joys of being in love. One day, when you least expect it, you'll find someone, and you'll fall in love."

"You are a hopeless romantic, Marty. I wish what you said would come true, but I don't think I could trust a man enough to give him my heart. It's better I never let love happen. That way no one gets hurt. Well, sir, I think you better leave so Blade can emerge." She gave him a hug, then ushered him out of the dressing room so she could dress.

Out of her bag, she removed her outfit. Her top was a prim white blouse with a collar and two breast pockets. It was cut off at the midriff to show off her flat stomach. She wore with it a plaid, pleated miniskirt held up with suspenders. Completing the outfit, she wore white knee-high hose and big, black, chunky-heeled shoes. The overall look was of a sexy parochial schoolgirl, until the hair, which she spiked with an egg white mixture. It made her hair stiff enough to stand on end, to which she added little beads. Standing back, she looked in the mirror and decided the look would do. *I can hardly wait to perform in something comfortable.*

Sitting at her dressing table, she began to accessorize. Out came the tiny diamond studs from her ears. On went her chunky silver hoops. Then she clipped different-sized loops around the outside of both ears. Not done there, she added two loops on each of her eyebrows and one on the side of her nose, then a stud to her tongue. She wondered how anyone could have a real one—just the clip-on stud drove her crazy. Then, as a final touch, she added matching chunky bracelets that jingled as she walked.

Leaving her dressing room, she saw the warm-up band had begun. Jenny liked to listen. It helped to get her in the mood. She also judged what type of audience they would have for the evening.

Noticing Rich and Marla standing by the stairs leading to the stage, she

walked over to join them. Conversation during the song was out since the volume could make a person go deaf, the reason they all wore protective earplugs. In between songs, they discussed how they liked the band and what way to approach their audience that evening. Then Rich directed her attention to the man in the center seat. Although she couldn't make him out, she had a vague impression of sandy blond hair and strong shoulders. The way the light was and the angle she was looking from wouldn't let her see any better. Then the last strains of music ended.

There would be a fifteen break for the audience to stretch while the warm-up band cleared the stage. When the lights went on, she tried to see the man Rich had referred too, but the scurrying stage techs clearing equipment made a good view impossible. She sighed, as she made her way to her dressing room for one last minute of peace before she returned to her place in the wings.

Instant butterflies had entered her stomach knowing it was only a matter of minutes before it was her turn to perform. Rich put his arm around her to reassure her. Patting his hand, she gave him a weak smile. Her other hand came to rest on her jumpy belly. Marty joined them to lend his moral support, as was his custom. Then it was time to climb the stairs to the stage. Taking a deep breath, Jenny followed the others.

* * * *

A little before concert time, Dan entered the amphitheater. He looked around and noticed the seating only went up half the hill, with grass covering the rest to the top. People were still entering, but by the looks of it, it would be a sellout crowd. *Blade must be a hit.*

As he made his way to his seat, he realized he must be at least ten years older than the oldest person in his section. He suddenly felt ancient, although he was only thirty-three. He intended this to be the only concert he had to attend. How hard could it be to find a loony admirer? He had read the notes, and there was cause for concern. After seeing this crowd, he decided it was probably some young kid with raging hormones. Feeling like a chaperone, he took his seat as the introductions began for the warm-up band.

After what seemed like hours of the worst torture he'd ever been through, it was time for the main course. Blade was entering the stage. The

musicians entered first to a deafening applause and much squealing, to the dismay of his poor ears. Finally the woman he had been waiting for entered the stage jumping up and down as she skipped across. His breath caught when he took in the outfit. *Good God, what have I gotten myself into?* She looked like an oversexed *Playboy* playmate. The skirt alone would set the hearts of even the most ancient codger to beating, let alone these poor young boys sitting in the first row. Looking down the row, he thought he might have to administer CPR before the first song was finished. One boy was beet red and had a look of pure adoration as he screamed Blade's name out repeatedly. The last time he saw anything like this was a film clip of the Beatles' debut in America. In the clip, the girls were crying and pushing each other trying to get closer to the stage. One girl had fainted, and the other girls hadn't even noticed.

Looking back to the stage, he studied the woman he would be forced to spend time with until the culprit was apprehended. She looked younger than her twenty-eight years. If he hadn't known, he would have guessed her to be about twenty-one. It could be the way she was dressed, but he doubted it. She was tall, very tall. She towered over most of the band, some of which was because of the shoes. They must have had at least four-inch heels. He wondered why she didn't fall and break her neck.

With her dancing around so much, he couldn't get a good enough look at her to see her features. His impression was if she ever removed all of the heavy jewelry, she would have delicate features. Her nose was small and straight, her ears were completely covered with silver, and her neck was long and slender. Although she was tall and thin, he noticed she was finely toned. Not muscle-bound like a weight lifter, but like someone who kept in shape on a strict workout schedule. She had curves in all the right places and breasts that would fill a man's hands perfectly.

Whoa, boy, where are these thoughts coming from? You have no business looking at her attributes. You are here to protect her, nothing more. He decided he had been too long without a woman. It was only natural his male thoughts would turn to lust.

Forcing his mind back from dangerous ground, he continued to observe her. She had a wonderful voice. It was such a waste of good talent to listen to her screaming out the lyrics. In fact, all the musicians seemed to be very talented. He would have to find out the story behind the band. He admitted

that he was inquisitive about what made them what they were. Being a detective, he had an active curiosity. It helped him solve his cases. He asked questions until he was satisfied with the answers. Then he put the puzzle together to find the crook.

He had been so lost in his own thoughts that he hadn't noticed the song they were performing had a tamer beat and a definite sexual connotation. He watched in wonder as Blade gyrated, moving her hands up and down her sides as she did so. Then, when he thought he was going to need the CPR that he was thinking he might have to give to someone else, she dropped to her knees.

* * * *

Jenny had been trying to see what Dan looked like throughout the concert without being obvious. However, she had only gotten glimpses. The fact he wore a plain blue T-shirt was about all she could add to her earlier collection. Starting their new song, "Come to Me, Baby," she paused a moment to change gears, from rage to sensuality. She started to strut around the stage, with her chin lowered, her eyes dreamy as she looked into the audience as if she were seducing everyone. Then the part came that she had argued with Marla about. She didn't feel comfortable crawling across the stage, but Marla had assured her the fans would eat it up. She had reminded Marla their fans' average age was about half hers. Marla said they would love it even more.

She dropped to her knees as far from the front of the stage as possible. Sensually, she crawled, one hand coming forward as her knee did. She dipped her hip on the other side graceful as a tiger. The words of the chorus left her lips, as she stalked on all fours toward the man she would be spending more time with than she ever had with a man. When she saw his eyes on her, her breath caught in her throat. He was too handsome. His sandy blond hair had a disheveled look. His shirt fit to perfection over his sculptured chest. It almost made her purr like the cat she was emulating. When she got to the end of the stage, her eyes never leaving his, she rolled to her back and let her head hang over the edge.

Looking upside-down at him, she lifted her hand and placed a finger in her mouth. She pursed her lips to suck as she slowly pulled it out. Once free,

she offered her finger to him as if to have him taste also. After a moment, she slowly brought it back and put the mic on the stage for the instrumental portion. She placed her hands on the sides of her face, then lowered them in a slow descent over her body while never breaking eye contact. She had always thought she was lacking in passion. Running her hands down her body, watching this man's face had her blood pumping. She was hot and feeling things she had no way to describe. She had never been introduced to passion. She wasn't sure if she could endure any more of this. Just when she thought she was going to die from the unaccustomed feelings, the music changed—her signal to roll back and come to her feet. Shakily she began to sing, breaking eye contact and taking a deep breath as she began her round about the stage. Her heart rate slowly went back to normal, and she began to cool off. Later, she would attribute it to the success of the new song, not to the man who had been the focus of her attention.

* * * *

Dan sat mesmerized as she slithered her way toward him, as seductive as a black panther. Her green eyes were incredible. Her face was as delicate as he had thought it would be. The closer she came, the harder it became for him to breathe. When she rolled to her back and dropped her head to look at him, he thought he was going to embarrass himself and come in his pants. *My God*. He had almost leaned over to take the offered finger into his mouth. Once again, he wondered what he had gotten himself into. The woman oozed sex out of her pores. She was going to eat him for breakfast. He wasn't sure that he had the nerves to deal with a professional seductress.

As the applause thundered for a third encore, Dan stood and made his way backstage to meet his new fiancée. Watching the group from a side angle as they came off the stage, Dan held his breath, then slowly let it out as he watched Blade walked toward him. He had convinced himself that she was hard, led a life of sex and drugs. He thought of Sarah and how different she had been. Sarah hadn't brought this fiery passion that made his blood boil. She was soft and sweet, and the passion had been slow and tame.

The way he preferred it.

By the time Blade reached him, he had his guard up and was having trouble concealing the sneer his thoughts had brought on. Taking her hand,

trying to look natural, he wasn't prepared for the electric shock that ran from his hand through his body to his toes. From the look on her face, she had felt the same, which only hardened his resolve to keep everything on a professional level. Pulling her slowly into his arms, as the performance demanded, he spoke through gritted teeth.

"Jenny, I've missed you. It's been so long." He pushed her out of his arms and laid his hands on her shoulders. Looking into her eyes, he realized she was shaking. He got his second shock. Her clear, beautiful green eyes were full of apprehension. If he hadn't convinced himself of what he thought was her true character, he would have said there was innocence there.

"Dan, I'm so glad you're back. I've missed you too. Let me go change so we can go home."

Dan pulled her into his arms again. Before he let her go, he whispered in her ear, "You don't dress like that all the time, do you?" Then a flash went off, and he turned his head in the direction of the light. He pushed her away thinking to go after the culprit, but her words stopped him.

"You find something wrong with the way I dress? This is my trademark. Blade has an image to keep up. Of course I dress like this. Besides, I like it. It gives me the attention I crave." With that, she turned and walked away, seeming so used to the flashing lights of cameras that she didn't even notice.

Dan watched her until the door closed behind her with a definite slam that seemed to echo although they were in an open-air amphitheater. *Well, we've gotten off to a whopping start.* He admitted to himself that it was his fault. He couldn't help it. She had made him feel guilty about his response to her. He hadn't felt that way about anyone, even his Sarah. He'd think about it later, along with the picture that would be in the local rag in the morning. For now, he had his part to play.

Turning to the rest, he greeted them each by name, shook their hands like long-lost friends. As he did this, he looked around at all the stagehands, or techs, as he was told to refer to them. After all, he had to be politically correct in this day and age. They were busy breaking down the equipment.

Tomorrow and the next day, they would be getting the trucks loaded for their tour. He wondered how the band traveled. Did they fly and meet the trucks in each place, or did they have a bus as many groups did? This would be one of the things he would soon find out. He would be coming back the

next day while Blade worked on their music video. He would tell anyone who asked he was interested in what went on. That would be his reason for joining the tour, though he still hoped he wouldn't have to go that far. So far, too many people had access to her dressing room while she was onstage for him to eliminate anyone.

* * * *

Jenny sat looking in her mirror. *What have I gotten myself into?* As she had walked off the stage, she had seen him fully for the first time. It had taken her breath away. He had been standing there, confident and looking out of place in his cowboy-cut jeans, boots, and tight-fitting blue T-shirt. He was well built, and she had judged him to be over six feet tall. With her four-inch heels, she had been slightly taller than he was. Some men would be intimidated. She was sure he hadn't been. In her normal attire, she would be at eye level, or in bare feet, she would be shorter by about three inches. She had never felt electrical charges with anyone else before he walked into her life. She knew by the look on his face when they hugged that he had felt the same. It had only made him angrier for some reason.

Surprised, she realized he had looked at her with a mixture of anger and contempt. In that moment, she had known he had already judged her and she had come up lacking. He had hated her at first sight.

She told herself it didn't matter that this stranger coming into her life didn't like her. *Who are you kidding?* Since she had been a small child, she had always wanted everyone to like her, sometimes going along with the schemes of her friends she normally wouldn't have done just to be liked.

When he had asked about her clothes, she had been shocked, and before she thought about the consequences of her words, a little imp made her answer. When she said she always dressed pop rock, she had caught Marla's expression of astonishment. She knew how much Jenny hated the way they all dressed for the concert. Nodding to the rest of the band, she had marched off to her dressing room to change. She wouldn't think about it now. It was late, and she just wanted to go home.

She just hoped she had something to change into after the image she had just painted. Because of her rash statement about her clothes, now her hair would have to be left until she could shower at home.

Everything needed to be cleaned out of her dressing room since they wouldn't be coming back. She loaded her bag, and once it was ready, she set it aside. She found an outfit left hanging in the closet and flung it on a chair to change into. The schoolgirl shoes were black, flat, and more comfortable. The pants were bright pink plaid, Capri style. Adding a red-striped shirt and lacy white socks, she had an outfit that fit the image but at least was comfortable.

She finished packing her things. She saw a card on the floor she hadn't noticed before. Thinking it garbage, she picked it up to throw it away. As she set the motion to toss it into the garbage, she caught sight of the words that began as all of her other notes had. Stopping mid-swing, she brought the card into focus to read.

Peek-a-boo, I see you!
Jenny, Jenny, Jenny, do you think I'm an idiot?
Get rid of the watchdog. I'm not going to hurt you. I love you.
And soon you'll realize you love me. Who's he with, the FBI, the local yokels? Or is he a private dick? I'll give you a couple of days to get rid of him.
Don't disappoint me.
Runner

Shakily, she sat the note down. Her first thought was to run out to get Dan. Then she read it again. Either this person was guessing or he knew. She decided to discuss it with Dan when they got home. For now, she would pretend she hadn't received it, in case Runner was watching. Slipping it into her pocket, she picked up her bag to leave and swept the room with her eyes to make sure she left nothing behind.

Jenny saw Dan as she left her dressing room. She had purposely worn clothes to fit the part she played on stage. She knew it was childish, but damn, he'd goaded her with his superior attitude. Even from ten paces away, she could hear his sigh at her manner of dress.

Too bad, he'd just have to live with it.

The smile he pasted on his face when he greeted her was as phony as her tattoos. When she stood in front of him, he reached for her hand. She glanced up from under her lashes and tried to give him a coy smile, but

knew it came out weak. He frowned a moment as if he was about to say something, but then he shrugged. He asked where her car was, and they joined the group and all left the building together.

At her car, he leaned down to ask her address, his whispered words feathered over her ear. Electricity zipped down her spine she had to suppress a shudder. He shut the door firmly, and then she watched him walk to his car. She could see his head swiveling as he took in the parking lot and surrounding area. He'd make a good bodyguard.

What was about him that caused her to act out of character?

The amphitheater was about thirty minutes from her downtown condo. Careful as always when she drove, she didn't race but drove the roads with confidence. She glanced in her rearview mirror as she traversed the streets of San Diego, he followed at a safe distance. They finally arrived at the high-rise condominium. She turned into the parking garage. She loved this place sure it cost an arm and a leg, but it was worth every penny. Or was, until she found out someone knew where her private pad was.

Her privacy breached. Jenny looked over at Dan as she drove into a stall. He pulled his car directly behind hers and signaled her to stay in her car. She watched as he got out, looked around the garage, and talked to the attendant. Although she was a mass of nerves from the combination of the notes and his staying with her in her private domain, she didn't miss the fact he had the perfect body. She'd always been a sucker for tight, Western-cut jeans, especially when the wearer had a nice butt. Realizing where her thoughts had gone, she quickly took her eyes from Dan and started to gather her things. When he knocked on the window, she was eager to go to her condo and hide in her bedroom the rest of the night.

"Okay, everything is clear. Where should I leave my car?"

"On the top level there are stalls for visitors or extra cars, for anyone living in the complex. We're leaving in a few days on tour. I don't think I need to get you a pass. However, if this, heaven forbid, is still going on when we get back, I'll check into one for you."

"I'll walk you to the condo, check things out there, then come back and move my car and get my things." Taking her hand, he led the way to the elevator as if it was the most natural thing in the world. Anyone looking on would think they were an ordinary couple walking from their car. Both were aware that was the furthest thing from the truth.

It was all Jenny could do to leave her hand in his grasp. From the moment he had touched her, little electrical shocks had begun to run up her arm. Her hand felt as if any moment it would catch on fire.

Stealing a glance at Dan, she saw the grim look on his face and the lock of his jaw. It certainly wasn't the look of a man in love. She wondered if he had felt the same shocks running up his arm, or if he just hated being with her?

He stood while she unlocked her door.

"I have to admit you have enough locks to keep out a battalion of thieves. Wait." He placed a restraining hand on her arm and motioned her to let him go first.

She waited by the door, and he'd pulled a gun from the small of his back. She swallowed as he raised it in readiness, even though she knew that it was a precaution, that he really didn't expect to find anyone or anything.

It made the threat more real.

A frowned appeared on his face as his gaze swept over the mess in the living room. Plates with half-eaten pizza were on the floor and the coffee table. There were empty champagne glasses to go with the rest. She held back the grown that wanted to escape.

She opened her mouth to explain, but then he threw her a disgusted look and a muttered, "Nice." Her mouth snapped shut before without saying a word.

The same imp that had gotten into her at the amphitheater after the concert earlier made her look around and shrug her shoulders as if she didn't understand what the problem was.

"I'll check out the rest of the condo. You stay here."

"I'm thirsty. Check out the kitchen first. I'll wait there while you check the rest." She let her stage attitude cloak her, mask the hurt that he didn't like her on sight. She headed toward the kitchen Dan stopped her before she entered, with a grip on her elbow. He walked around the small space, then nodded for her to enter.

"Your bedroom will be the one on the left. There's a bath next to it you can use. I have my own bath in my bedroom."

"Okay, you stay here. I don't think anyone is here. Seems like a pretty secure building. I'll be back in a moment."

Jenny kicked off her shoes and left them in the middle of the floor.

Resisting the urge to get a glass out of the cupboard, she reached into the fridge and pulled out the bottle of Riesling she had opened the night before. She usually cut a few pieces of cheese and grabbed a handful of grapes to go with her glass of wine. Taking them, she would go sit on her couch in her bedroom and enjoy the view. Tonight, however, she grabbed the bottle and hopped up to sit on the counter. Something she hated to see people to do. She knew the good detective would expect the worse, and for some reason she couldn't fathom, she wanted to oblige him.

* * * *

He had left Jenny to get her drink, or whatever she needed. He decided he wouldn't be surprised to see her chugging a whiskey when he returned.

He took a circular route, picking the bath next to the kitchen. It was decorated tastefully in pastels. At first, he was surprised at the neatness, then guessed she just never used it.

Following from there, he entered the master bedroom. The first thing that caught his eye was the view out the large picture window. He could see why she picked this condo. It overlooked the bay, allowing a person to see across to Coronado Island. The lights danced over the water, and sailboats bobbed at their places at the marina. The bedroom colors were Southwestern—sandy browns with vibrant splashes of reddish oranges and turquoise from the throw pillows on the bed and the couch by the window. He imagined her sitting and looking out the window daydreaming or reading a book. Off to the left was a master bath, which included a nice jetted tub and a separate shower. To the right of the room was a door that led into an exercise area. From what he could tell, she had state-of-the-art equipment, indicating she was dedicated to fitness.

Here again, he noticed the room was spotless, at odds with the condition of the living room and kitchen. Exiting, he found the spare bedroom across the hall. Although tastefully decorated, it had the feel of emptiness one gets when walking into a room never used. He noticed that she had made up the bed and had left some clean towels on the chair for his use. He walked to the window. The view looked out over downtown San Diego.

When Dan walked into the kitchen, he had been about to say everything looked fine. The words died in his throat as he looked at Jenny sitting on the

counter, her head tilted back with the bottle of wine to her lips, drinking thirstily. When drops escaped from the corner of her mouth, she placed the bottle at her side. She took her fingers and brushed the drops toward her mouth, then sucked them dry. He couldn't seem to catch his breath.

"Everything okay, Detective?"

Dan forced himself to drag his eyes away from her lips, and raised them to hers. She looked at him from the corner of her eye. He lost his train of thought. He swallowed.

"Ahh…seems to be fine. I think I'll go move my car and bring my things in. Please lock the door behind me." He turned, in a hurry to escape before he said or did something stupid.

"Don't tell me your wife has never caught you chugging from the orange juice bottle." Jenny's words stopped him.

He turned back and swallowed the anger, so he could reply, "She would have hung me for doing something like that."

"Past tense, I'm sorry. I can see you still love her."

"It was a long time ago. I'll just go get my things." He wasn't going to explain Sarah had passed away. That she hadn't left him.

"Oh, I forgot this. I wanted to give it to you when we were alone." Lifting a slim cheek off the counter, she reached into her back pocket to pull out the note she'd found earlier. After what seemed an hour, Dan finally found the power to move toward the offered hand. He snatched the note out of her hand as if the touch of her fingers had burned. Looking it over, he glanced up at her. She sat watching him with an intent look on her face.

"When did you get this?"

"It was in my dressing room when I went back after the show. I wanted to bring it out to you as soon as I saw it. I decided it would be best to give it to you when we were alone. It has to be someone who knows me enough to know I have no fiancé."

"Yes, I agree. It could be someone in the band." He held up his hand to stop her protest. "I know you don't want to think that. It's an angle I have to pursue. So far, the notes are not life-threatening. I want to find out who is behind this before that happens. Problem is you're too visible. I'll have to watch closely. Now I know you're tired. I'm asking you to stay up just a little longer. I'm going to go get my things and take care of my car. When I get back, I would like you to tell me a little about each of the band members.

I have pictures. I know their names, but I'd like their background."

"Okay, I'll just go hop in the shower while you're gone, and I'll be ready when you get back."

"Come lock the door behind me." Again, he turned to walk to the door. The rattle of keys caused him to turn back. Jenny had jumped down from her perch on the counter. She grabbed a set of spare keys out of the drawer.

"Here, Detective." She tossed the keys to him. Catching them on reflex, he gave her a questioning look.

"I dug those up for you so you wouldn't have to rely on me to always be at the door to let you in."

"Thanks. I'll be back in a few minutes."

* * * *

Jenny sighed as she walked back to her room. She took her clothes off and neatly put them away. In the shower, she stood under the hot spray and tried to relax and let the day's stress wear off. She had longed for a nice hot bath. She would have to indulge herself with that tomorrow.

She couldn't believe herself. She'd met Dan just a few hours ago. Already he had turned her world upside down. Not to mention the fact that she was acting like the fifteen-year-old who had been dumped in a foster home.

Rich's mom, Sandy, had assumed the worst of Jenny from the minute she had walked in the door. She had thought that Jenny was into sex, drugs, and rock and roll. Only the last had been true. It was the reason she and Rich had got on from the start. They both had a natural talent for music. Rich protected her from his mother. He understood that she was not the troublemaker his mother had expected.

It hadn't really Sandy's fault. They tried to help lost children. In the past, they'd always been hard to handle. There was no reason for Sandy to think that Jenny would be any different.

For the first month, Jenny acted the way Sandy expected. At school, she was herself. Rich got to know her away from his family. He started to defend her at home. It caused problems for everyone. Sandy only saw the worst. Finally, one day it came to a head. Jenny couldn't remember the actual reason it did. She just remembered the fight and Rich walking in and

catching his mother's hand as it descended toward Jenny's face. He sat his mother down and made her listen. And he hadn't been any easier on Jenny. He blamed Jenny for some of the problem. She had never tried to show Sandy that she was wrong. Sandy had been skeptical at first, but they'd started an uneasy truce.

Now, she was friends with Sandy. Since that day she had tried to always be honest with herself and those around her. She had never reverted to acting that way since. If people expected the worst, that was their problem. They found out soon enough they were wrong. *So why do I feel the need to act so childishly around Dan?* Being honest with herself, she realized it hurt her feelings that he hadn't liked her from the moment he met her.

She dried off from her shower and decided that she was going to ask Dan for a truce and to start over. She didn't want to go on pretending since it could turn out to be a long-term assignment for Dan. He needed to know the real person in order to understand her and maybe the person who was stalking her. Feeling better about her decision, she pulled on her favorite terry robe and put her feet into matching slippers.

When she walked into the living room, Dan had not returned yet. Taking advantage, she cleared the coffee table and began to load the dishwasher. Before she could do more, she heard the key in the lock. She left the kitchen and met Dan at the door. Smiling, she gestured to the couch and motioned him to sit.

Dan stood staring at her, clearly not believing his eyes.

She was in her big frog slippers, which made her a little shorter than he was. Her white terry robe with big green frogs matched the amphibians on her feet. She could only imagine what he thought Marty had said she looked like a fifteen-year-old when she wore her favorite jammies.

"Where do you want to start? I'd like to hurry. We need to get some sleep, and I want to get up early to clean before we go to the shoot."

"You're going to clean this mess?"

"Look, I owe you an apology. We got off to a bad start. I want to introduce myself to you and start over." Putting out her hand, she waited until he reluctantly took it and then introduced herself as if they had never met.

"I'm not really the way I let you think. I apologize about letting you continue with the wrong idea. I could explain why I did it. It'd probably take

a couple of hours and a visit to my counselor to make you understand. I won't go there. From now on, I'll be myself, and that does not include, one, dressing like Blade; two, living in a pigsty; and three, sitting on counters drinking from any kind of a bottle. Since we're going to be together for a while, can we call a truce?"

For a moment, she didn't think he'd answer, Then he folded his arms and cocked his head to the side to regard her. "You're right. I don't want to waste the energy to be angry all the time. But…I'm going to reserve judgment about my opinion of you."

"Fair enough." She could live with that. Hopefully he'd realize she was being honest.

"Okay, let's get this done then. I brought the photos Greg gave me. We'll go over each of the members of the band as I put the photo on the table. If you don't mind, I'm going to take some notes."

"I don't mind. Who's first?"

"Let's start with Rich. I understand you know him from when you were in foster care with his family?"

Jenny briefly explained to him about running away. How child services had decided, after one meeting with her mother, that Jenny would be better off in foster care, hence how she came to live with Rich's family. She explained about the start of the band. Rich and Marla had already been dating. Both were a year older than Jenny. When they began practicing for the band, Jenny would always show up to listen. After a few sessions, Marla asked if Jenny could sing, and after listening to her, it was decided that she would join.

Jenny went on from there to describe her relationship and background with the rest of the group. Jimmy, Doug, Larry, and Tessa had gone to high school with them. Tessa was Jenny's age, and the rest were Rich's age. At first, they played at parties of friends. One day, Doug's uncle brought a friend over to listen to them. He was so impressed that, from then on, Marty managed their careers, getting small-venue gigs until Jenny wrote their number-one hit and the group skyrocketed to the top. They had been in college by then, where Bonnie had joined the group when she moved from New York and Juilliard.

Dan looked thoughtful for a moment. He must have decided he had all he needed on the band, because he moved on to her mentors, Marty, Paul,

and her mother. She briefly described her relationship with her mother.

"Jenny, you're leaving out vital information."

"What? I don't have a lot to do with my mother. There's really nothing to tell you."

She grew uncomfortable under his scrutiny, until he finally muttered, "I doubt your mother's responsible for the notes, so I'll let it slide. Tell me about Marty and Paul."

"They're my parents. I love them both. Paul is an investment banker and handles all of the finances for the group. He's a genius. None of us will ever need to work if we don't choose to."

After explaining how Paul had invested wisely for all of them, Jenny said, "That's the reason we're ending Blade. We don't need the money, and we outgrew pop a long time ago. The tour is being advertised as our farewell tour. I'll be a little sad to have it over, but now we can branch out as we've wanted to for a long time."

"Could any of the band members be resentful of the end of your careers?"

"No, we've discussed it at length, and everyone agrees. Besides, we're not ending our careers. I thought I had mentioned we were changing to a new sound, one for an older crowd."

"What do you mean, 'older crowd'?"

"Audiences of our own ages and older. I'm sure there will be some younger. We want to do a little blues, folk, Celtic, along those lines. I'm Irish and very interested in the music from my heritage. I'm going to concentrate on writing some new music during the travel time on the tour. We go by bus or motor coach, if you want to call them that. There's a lot of downtime. Marty is going to focus on getting us gigs at small venues and some music festivals. You've been to Concerts on the Bay at Humphreys, haven't you?"

"Yes, I saw Ray Charles there with Sarah." She gave him an inquiring look. A faint tinge of jealousy, which was absurd under the circumstances, rippled down her spine.

"Sarah? Is that the wife who would have hung you for drinking out of the orange juice bottle?"

"Yes, Sarah was my wife. It was a long time ago. It's late. We had better go to bed. What's the plan for tomorrow?" He stood, and she watched

him gather up the files he'd spread out over the table. The door had closed with a resounding bang on the subject of Sarah. She'd have to remember that.

Letting the matter of his late wife drop, Jenny outlined their morning.

"We're to meet everyone at the Coaster Saloon for breakfast. It's a little dive in Mission Beach, but it has great steak and eggs. I thought I'd get up and work out, then clean in here before we head out. Will that disturb you?"

"No, I like to run in mornings when it's cool. I think I'll run along the water through Seaport Village. It'll be pretty deserted with only runners in the early morning before it opens. I'll knock on your door when I leave so you can lock the dead bolts. I think you're safe here."

"That sounds okay. I'll see you in the morning." As they both turned to go to their separate rooms, Jenny stopped Dan.

"Detective, I'm sorry you got stuck babysitting me. I honestly didn't think these notes would warrant so much attention. I thought the police would look at them and then have an officer ask around at the studio and such. Since they're not threatening, I thought that would be all it would merit. I want to thank you for putting your life on hold while you find this Runner person who seems fixated on me. I just wanted you to know that I understand you would rather be doing your everyday detective work. Not hanging around with me and mine." She turned, went into her room, and shut the door before he could reply.

* * * *

Dan stood staring at her door for a moment before retiring to his own room. He had to admit she had his insides in a tangle of confusion. He arrived at the concert earlier that evening ready to dislike everything about her. He didn't understand that in itself. He was usually very honest in his dealings with people. No matter what background a person came from, he always let them prove themselves in his eyes before he passed judgment.

Not so with Jenny.

He had her tried, judged, and convicted her as a sexpot, druggy, and an otherwise worthless human being before he met her. She had proved him wrong from the first moment he laid eyes on her. True, she dressed the part, which is why he had clung to the picture he'd painted. Even when she acted

the way he expected, there'd been a connection, and a little voice in his brain told him that she was as far from his earlier assessment as anyone could get.

When he'd come back from parking, she'd been there to greet him in her frog attire, which reminded him of Greg's daughter Katie. Her hair was curling softly around her face, the most beautiful auburn color he'd ever seen, and her green eyes, fringed by long lashes, dominated her face. A face that was free of makeup, fresh and young. That had almost been his undoing.

He had been glad that she didn't dress like that all the time, or he'd really be in trouble. In her skimpy outfit, he could keep his distance, remind himself of what she was really like.

If only she hadn't confessed that in reality, she *did* dress like that and they'd called a truce. After undressing and climbing under the fresh, cool sheets, he thought about the woman on the other side of the wall. He would have to make sure that he kept his distance. He knew that he had finally met the woman who could make him get on with his life, if not forget his Sarah. She could make him put Sarah in a place in his heart for memories. Damn it, he wasn't ready to do that. He didn't think he would ever be ready. The last thought through his mind before sleep overtook him was that he would have to keep pushing her away, for both their sakes. He didn't want to ever love anyone again. It hurt too much when you lost them, and he seemed to always lose the people he loved.

* * * *

The woman on the other side of the wall was thinking thoughts that would have given Dan nightmares had he known. She knew she'd been fishing when she asked about his wife, but she didn't care. She had wanted to know. She didn't know how she knew, but Sarah was still special to him. She felt that if they were to get along, knowing the facts would help her understand him. Jenny, too wound up to sleep, sat on her couch looking over the view of the bay and thought about the sleeping man in the other bedroom.

She always kept men at an arm's length. She thought that it was because in her youth the men her mother had brought home always left a bad taste in

her mouth. She made up her mind at an early age she would never rely on a man for anything. She would make her own way. If she forfeited a family, that would be too bad. She wouldn't bring a child into this world if that child would be as unhappy as she'd been. She admitted to herself that she had been afraid that, if she let a man get close, she would lose her self-worth as her mother had and rely on the man for everything. She built a wall around herself, never letting anyone get close. She loved her friends, but it was a safe love.

It was a love that couldn't hurt her.

Now looking over the twinkling lights bobbing over the bay, she realized that she had been saving herself for the right man. Because deep down in a secret place in her heart, she knew she wanted to have a home and a family. She knew if the right man came along, she would make sure her children would have the best of everything. But above all else, they would be loved, as she hadn't been. She had never told anyone how she felt. She had never let herself examine these thoughts herself.

Now the man she had been waiting for was sleeping so close. He wanted nothing to do with her. She had always thrived on challenges, and here was the most important challenge of her life. She had to win him over or live the rest of her life alone and childless. She tried to laugh at herself. She didn't know if he was married, had kids, or anything else. It was crazy, since she hadn't even known him for twenty-four hours, but somehow, she knew she was destined to be with him.

She needed sleep. She stood and gazed for a few seconds more then turned to go to her bed. She fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow, with a secret womanly smile on her face as her last thoughts were that he wouldn't have a chance. She may not know how to be a femme fatale, but she was going to learn. He would be in love with her before he knew what hit him. They were going to have the American Dream, complete with two-point-five children.

Chapter Four

Jenny woke with a start and wondered what had awakened her. Dawn was just creeping through her window. Hearing a knock, she realized it was only Dan ready for his morning run. Dragging her robe around her, she sleepily followed Dan to the front door and dutifully locked the dead bolts after he left. Heading back to her room, she almost let the bed lull her back for another hour of sleep, but catching sight of the mess still left in the living room, she turned abruptly toward the kitchen to make a cup of tea.

After her tea, she felt better. She was still a little groggy, but at least not so heavy-headed as if she'd been drinking all night. Although she'd never had a hangover, she imagined what she was now feeling was pretty close. Deciding to work out for a while before she cleaned, she changed into shorts and a top and started her daily jog on the treadmill. She hated the treadmill because it was so boring, which was the reason she had installed the hanging television. Trudging along, she watched the morning news and caught up on what had happened in the world. After an hour of exercise, she felt ready to tackle the mess in the other room. After she set a few CDs in the changer, she got her cleaning supplies ready. She was now armed and ready to fight dirt. Turning the music up the way she liked it, she knew she'd never hear the knock when Dan returned. She unlocked the bolts and went to work.

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Dan arrived a little later and knocked loudly. When no answer came, he unlocked the doorknob and swore when it swung open. He opened the door a little wider expecting to find Jenny gone out on an errand or something. He'd made her promise she wouldn't go anywhere without him. He wasn't prepared for the bluesy blues that sounded throughout the condo. Looking around, he saw the place was spotless. He saw vases of flowers around the

room in various colors, something he hadn't noticed the night before with all the clutter. He found Jenny in the kitchen on her knees scrubbing the floor, and what faced him was a very nicely shaped derrière. Dan stood there like a kid with his first view of a girlie magazine.

He watched as she turned and saw him. She raised an eyebrow at him. He forced the protective shield he'd built around himself to come down, and he cleared his throat. Looking at her, he knew he should move. But for some reason, his legs wouldn't do what he was trying to tell them. Then she smiled at him and asked how his run was. He tried to speak and couldn't. Finally, when he did, the words were rough and gruff, but he couldn't help it.

"It was fine. How long do we have before we need to head to Mission Beach?"

"About forty-five minutes. I'll be through here in a minute, and then I just need to hop in the shower. Since there will be a makeup person there, I'll skip my own makeup ritual for this morning."

She smiled. She looked pleased about something, and he worried that she knew the effect she had on him.

"I wanted to know if it would be all right if I worked out on some of your weights before I shower."

"Sure, anytime. Make yourself at home."

Turning, he found himself almost running away from her. He had a feeling he was about to make himself too much at home. Oh how he wished she was the way he originally thought her to be. That he could have fought. This other, softer, Jenny, he didn't know what to do about.

* * * *

Shaking her head, Jenny thought that maybe she wouldn't need to talk to Marla about any female tricks after all. She seemed to be confusing Dan without any. Just as well. She didn't like the thought of games. She would rather earn his respect and his love honestly.

Sitting back on her heels to survey the gleaming floor, a thought crossed her mind that almost ruined her mood. Here she was, making plans to have the man who was supposed to be helping her fall in love with her. She had forgotten for a while about the notes. So far, they hadn't been threatening,

but how long would that last when she didn't respond to them? Maybe it was best to wait until all of this was over. But then she had waited twenty-eight years for him, and she would just take it a day at a time. Poor Dan, his world was going to change, and she would make sure it was for the better.

Exactly forty-six minutes later, they were on their way to the beach, Dan outlined what he planned for the day. First, he would watch some of the taping until Marty arrived. Then they would go make sure everything was going all right with the packing of the equipment for the tour. Dan would supposedly go along as an interested bystander and observe to see if he saw anyone acting suspicious.

When he had called the captain the night before to let him know about the other note and the possibility his cover was blown, Greg told Dan that he would send an officer over to talk to Jenny and the crew while Dan and Marty were overlooking the loading. They hoped it would confuse the culprit into believing who Dan was and would give them a clue on how close the person was to Jenny. If he knew Dan was a detective, it had to be someone close enough to a band member to have betrayed their confidence.

Jenny was only half listening. She was remembering her first reaction to Dan when he walked out of the bedroom ready for the day. He wore khaki shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, and Ray-Bans on top of his head. The crowning touch was the flip-flops on his feet. *Very nice, tanned feet.* He looked like the typical California beach boy. He had seemed a bit embarrassed when he told her that he could hardly play the part of her lover dressed in his usual detective uniform. Western jeans, cowboy boots, and a T-shirt would stick out like a sore thumb on the beach.

She had smiled a secret, feminine smile; turned; and led the way to the parking garage. She had felt Dan's bewildered look boring through her back. With her wearing white Capri jeans, a pink cotton top, and her own flip-flops, they looked like a casual California couple without a worry in the world.

She was enjoying herself. Of course, she thought it a little sad she had to find the man of her dreams when she should be concentrating on keeping herself safe instead of letting herself daydream about the good detective. Nevertheless, he was a handsome man with a golden tan and sandy hair. With all of that muscle, any red-blooded American woman would be having heart palpitations. Why shouldn't she? She started when she realized Dan

was looking at her waiting for an answer to a question she hadn't heard.

"Hello?" Dan snapped his fingers. "I said how long does it usually take to tape your videos? You haven't been listening to me, have you?"

"It's such a nice day. I guess I've been enjoying the ride to the beach with a handsome man. I didn't want to think about reality. It's so ugly sometimes."

"I'm here to do my job. Which is to protect you. I'm not out on a picnic to the beach with my girlfriend. I know that's what it's supposed to look like, but you can't let yourself be caught up in the pretense. I can't have you letting your guard down. Do you understand? I need you to keep your eyes open and to tell me if you see anyone out there today who doesn't belong."

His harshness startled her. Somehow she'd pushed a button with her reply about enjoying the ride. "Understood, Detective. I won't let myself lose sight of your mission again. We should be ready to wrap up the filming this evening about five. Then I need to go home and pack. They'll be at the condo with the motor coach first thing in the morning. If it meets with your approval, sir, I'd like to stop at the market to get something to grill up on the barbecue for dinner." Jenny delivered the words in an injured tone.

Her back straightened on its own accord, and she could feel Dan's eyes on her and didn't care. She refused to look his way. He had spoiled the mood in the car with his harshness, not her.

"Unless I get lucky and wrap this up today, looks like I'll be joining you on your tour. It will be a new experience for me. Captain seems to think it will do me good. Do you mind if I go take care of a few things while you cook dinner, or would you like me to stay and help? I could run my errands after if necessary." Dan's tone had softened. She risked a glance his way. His eyes slid from the road for a brief second, and their eyes met

She refused to be pacified, even though that look had been electric. "That would work out fine. Just let me know how long you'll be gone, and I'll have everything ready when you get back. Looks like we're the last to arrive. Everyone's here."

She scrambled out of the car before he had time to come around and help her out. Dan had parked in the lot at Belmont Park, across the street from the Coaster Saloon. She assumed he followed her, but she didn't really care. She raced toward the others. She could see them sitting at the little bar waiting for their breakfast.

* * * *

He walked a little slower, not trying to catch up. Mostly he was tightening the reins on his emotions where Jenny was concerned. He concentrated on looking around, taking in the layout of the area. The bar itself was in a converted garage. In other times, it would have been for the apartment above.

The front end of the bar was opened, with stools bordering the sidewalk. The brick front of the building was painted to resemble an American flag.

"Hi, how is everyone today?" Dan sat in the seat Jenny motioned him to and began to look at the menu.

A chorus of greetings rang out around the table.

"See those guys in the front?" Jenny leaned over to whisper once everyone had settled down.

"Yes." Dan swiveled in his seat to look at the four old-timers drinking and gossiping, looking like they were a permanent fixture of the place.

"They are always here. I can't remember a time they weren't," Jenny breathed in awe, like it was the most amazing thing in the world.

"Dan," Jimmy interrupted. "I recommend the steak and eggs. They are the best. Place doesn't look like it, but the food is great."

"No way, their huevos rancheros are better," Larry insisted, pronouncing it like *harvey ranchers*.

After more good-natured arguing, all had ordered, and the conversation turned to the shoot. There would be a portion of the beach sectioned off to keep back all the fans who would be turning up to watch. Dan gathered that no matter how hard they tried, word always leaked out about the whereabouts of their filming. Observing the interaction of the group, he was tempted to believe Jenny when she stubbornly insisted that it was no one close who could be writing the notes.

Breakfast ended, and everyone wandered down to the beach to find out where they could get ready. There were two tents set up for the makeup and dressing areas, one for the women and one for the men. Dan was introduced to a woman named Martha, who was the women's makeup artist. She took Jenny's arm and led her off. Dan was left standing with Rich and Marla. Shaking his head, he looked back to Rich and decided to get better

acquainted with the two.

"Martha looks more like a Mrs. Santa Claus than a makeup artist for pop rock videos."

"Don't let her looks fool you. She's one of the best in the business, and you'd be surprised at the outrageous costumes she can come up with," Rich warned.

"I'll have to wait and see. I'm half expecting everyone to come out of there looking like elves. Sorry, but I'm going to change the subject. After all, I'm here to do a job, and that means catching whoever is writing these notes. Rich, I agree with Jenny. Neither you nor your wife has anything to do with the notes, but as a precaution, we have to run everyone through our database at the station. Everyone seems to check out so far." Dan had only crossed these two off the list of suspects. "Some of you have some minor priors. Other than that, nothing serious. But, until I'm sure, I'm not removing anyone else. Who do the two of you think could be behind these notes?" Today, he hoped to get a few leads when he went with Marty to look things over at the theater.

"We discussed it, certainly. However, we can't think of anyone who would want to hurt Jenny. Everyone loves her. She's kind, smart, and compassionate, and she would give any of us the shirt off her back even if it was the only one she owned."

"Consider this. The notes have not been threatening, and one even said he didn't want to hurt her. Could it be someone believing they are in love with her?" Dan asked.

"To be honest, I hadn't thought of that. Usually notes lead to threats of violence. Anyway, they do on television. What do you think, Marla?"

"I hadn't thought of that either. I guess this guy could be trying to romance her through a note, which is just too creepy. I can't think of anyone who would do that either." Marla gave a slight shudder and looked around as if she might see the culprit watching them.

Just then, they heard loud voices coming from the women's makeup tent. An argument was definitely going on. The only word recognizable was a strong "No" being repeated, and the voice could only be Jenny's.

"Just when I was starting to think she wasn't the prima donna most stars are. But sounds like I was right to begin with." Dan knew that he was just looking for anything to make him see Jenny the way he had originally

thought. He was beginning to think it would be his only defense against his growing fascination with the beautiful pop star.

"You couldn't be more wrong," Marla said as she cast uncertain glances toward the tent.

"I don't think Martha's going to win this one." Bonnie chuckled as she and Tessa joined the group.

"What's going on?" Marla turned back to ask Bonnie. "If Jenny is that adamant, I'm sure I'm not going to like it either."

"Martha's got this idea all the women in the video have full-body paint instead of wearing suits with our usual tats," Bonnie explained. "I think it's a great idea. I like showing off my body." She was also the only one of the women who had most of her own tattoos and didn't need to use many fake ones.

"No way." Two voices piped up at the same time. Marla and Rich were both shaking their heads.

"I'm with you guys," Tessa chipped in. "I don't want to be out in the ocean in nothing but paint. What happens if it washes off?

"You guys are such wusses. Look at Demi. She did a magazine spread when she was nine months' pregnant."

"You would think that. You'd run around naked if you wouldn't get arrested. Besides, I need to lose twenty pounds, and Marla's pregnant, not that she shows," Tessa said. "I hope Jenny wins. Then I won't have an argument when it's my turn for makeup."

All three women turned to watch Jenny walk toward them. Wearing a white terry cloth robe that hung to her knees, one couldn't tell if she'd won or not. Although not much time had elapsed, they figured she wore something under the robe. When she joined them, she still wore a disgruntled expression. She nodded to Bonnie, letting her know it was her turn for makeup.

* * * *

"I can't believe Martha wanted us to be painted. The suit she's making us wear is skimpy enough." Jenny cast a glare back toward the tent she had just left.

"What's the suit like? If it's one of those thongs, I'm not wearing it.

There is no way my butt's going to be jiggling around for the whole world to see on MTV." Tessa laid a protective hand over the imagined exposed area.

"It's a one-piece white suit, with French-cut legs. The whole back is exposed, but no thong," Jenny reassured Tessa, though she thought her friend was overly sensitive.

The suit would look great on Tessa's petite body. Tessa worked hard to keep in shape, and it showed. However, she was so short, a gained pound on her small frame looked like the equivalent of ten pounds on the others. Jenny thought if Tessa ever did lose the twenty pounds she was always trying to, she'd look anorexic.

After everyone was dressed and made up, they headed to the sectioned-off portion of the beach where the video was going to be shot. They set up a shade made with a palm-thatched umbrella top with lounge chairs underneath, giving the appearance of a Caribbean beach. They would have a man lounging in one of them, sipping a tropical concoction from a coconut while watching the group in the water. When the song started, the group would be out in the water, moving inland with the music. When it came to the chorus, Jenny would do her panther crawl up the sand with the waves lapping around her as she made her way to the waiting man. The video would end when he joined her with the last strains of "Come to Me, Baby" echoing over the sounds of the surf. Then he would take her in his arms as the scene faded out.

* * * *

Dan listened to the instructions being given and prayed Marty would arrive long before the chorus. He didn't think he could stand watching her in her white skin of a suit. It left very little to the imagination, and he had a very active one at the moment.

When she'd taken off the robe to reveal what was underneath, he'd thought he was going to hyperventilate and die right on the spot. Even the fake tattoos hadn't distracted from the skintight suit, which fit like a smooth sheath over her.

She had on a spiky Rod Stewart–looking white wig, with makeup so subtle that it enhanced the green of her eyes, the focal point when one

looked at her. When she did the crawl toward the camera, her eyes would be mesmerizing, which, Dan imagined, was what the director wanted. Marty arrived a few minutes later, much to Dan's relief.

* * * *

Marty, looking at the scene in the water and then seeing the look on Dan's face, realized he had better get Dan out of there before Dan made a fool of himself. Although, it would help this Runner person believe the man did love his Jenny.

"How's it going?" Marty asked as he joined Dan, trying to hide a smile when the young man jumped after being so engrossed in the goings-on in the ocean.

"Not that I know much about making a video, but it seems to be moving along smoothly. Although for a while it was touchy when Mrs. Santa Claus wanted the women to be in full-body paint instead of clothes."

"Mrs. Santa Claus?" Bewildered, Marty looked around for the jolly woman dressed in red.

"The makeup lady, I can't remember her name."

"Oh, Martha. She does come up with some wild ideas. Full-body paint, huh? Well I can imagine my Jenny when that was mentioned. She usually goes along with whatever is suggested, but she can turn stubborn if it's something she feels strongly about."

"This was one of those times, I guess, since she won out." Dan paused for a moment, as if considering his next words. "Jenny got another note last night after the concert."

"What?" Dan had Marty's full attention after the announcement.

"He wanted to know if I was a private investigator, with the local police, or the FBI. Of course he asked in a very colorful way."

"Is there really any use carrying on with the charade?"

"I don't know. Let's play it by ear for a while. Ready to go supervise the crew packing of the gear while I ask a few questions?" Catching Jenny's eye, Dan waved to let her know they were leaving.

"Yes, let's go fight some dragons for our Jenny." Marty let the subject of the note drop, then steered them toward his luxury car, his pride and joy. Not trusting anyone else to touch it, he washed it every day by hand.

"Nice car," Dan said as he walked around it before getting in.

"Yes, this is my other baby, Jenny being my first."

"You really care a lot for her, don't you?"

"Yes, Paul and I've known her since she was in high school. The pair of us more or less adopted her on the spot when we first met since we were not allowed to officially adopt any of our own. The others are wonderful kids, but they all have families of their own." Marty always discounted Collette as Jenny's mother. He felt she lost her privilege as mother a long time ago. "The feelings were mutual. From the start there was a connection with the three of us, and we've always felt it was destiny when Jenny was brought into our lives. Doug's uncle and I were acquaintances, and he contacted me to come see this new, young pop group. I did it as a favor, never dreaming it would turn out so well in the end. I have dealt with many young groups over the years. This group is by far the easiest to deal with. They're always open for suggestions. If they don't agree, they present their arguments and usually win out with what they want. To tell the truth, their ideas are always better than mine. There have only been minor problems with drinking or drugs, one of the boys got caught smoking dope in the early days, and I think one of them had a DUI. Other than that, everything has been pretty smooth, until this. I've racked my brain trying to think who it could be. I honestly can't think of anyone." Finally running out of words, Marty let Dan think about what he said.

"I've talked to almost all the members of the band, and so far, I have no reason to disagree with Jenny and point a finger at anyone who is close to her. I'll be talking to the captain tomorrow evening, and we'll go over everything that came back on the background checks. Everything so far has checked out. If anything major had shown up, he would have called me. Since I haven't heard anything, I'm assuming."

"I was hoping you would find this person before she leaves on tour. It will be harder to find someone once she's on the road."

"If it's someone in the area, maybe it will stop if the person has ties here and can't leave."

"Yes, but then it will start again when she gets back."

"I promise I'll find out who this is and put a stop to it. So far, nothing threatening has been in the notes. The last was a mild threat, which I believe was a fishing expedition to see if I was a cop. If Runner knows I'm not a

boyfriend, he's not just a fan and has to be someone close enough to Jenny to know she doesn't date. That surprises me. She is a very beautiful woman, and I would think she would have a lover in every port, so to speak."

"She is beautiful, and I'm not going to jump to the bait of your fishing expedition. You'll have to talk to Jenny about her love life. If she wants you to know why she doesn't date, as you put it, she'll tell you." Marty hoped he wanted to know on a personal level. He'd seen the way Jenny had watched Dan when he wasn't looking. His little girl was losing her heart for the first time, and he didn't want it to be smashed. He'd also noticed Dan wasn't immune to Jenny either. He would sit back and watch, and if needed, he would be there for her with a shoulder to cry on when this was over. He would kick Dan in the butt if he walked away and gave up the best thing that would ever come his way.

* * * *

Runner watched as the two men left the beach. It was funny that they thought Runner would believe Jenny had fallen in love, out of the blue. The man was obviously there to protect her because they thought she was in danger. It was laughable. *All I want to do is protect her, love her, and take care of her for the rest of her life.* Jenny would soon find out that they were soul mates.

Waiting for the day when the two of them would live there alone, away from the world, Runner had built a home just for Jenny. Runner had also built a music room especially for her, a peaceful room with a large window looking out over the forest. It would be an inspiration for Jenny when she was working on the music she would write in the future. Together, they would become a team and a legend in the music world.

Runner watched Jenny as she worked, her sleek body moving in sync with the waves as she crawled. She wouldn't have to do this any longer, pretend she liked the pop scene. She would be able to write and concentrate on the folk music from Ireland as she had dreamed of doing. Yes, Runner knew Jenny, her inner thoughts. Jenny had discussed her feelings many times with everyone around her. As soon as the tour was over, she wanted to do some folk music festivals. Marty promised he would find one in Ireland for the group to perform at, and it would be perfect. However, instead of the

group, it would be the two of them. Jenny would want it that way. Jenny would have her private getaway with her soul mate for inspiration. All Runner had to do was get rid of Mr. Slick Cop.

The plan had been to whisk Jenny away after the tour, when Runner's identity would be revealed after Jenny followed the instructions on the last note. Now, there would need to be a change of plan. No one was supposed to get hurt, but now there needed to be a message sent. Jenny had to find out no one would come between her and her soul mate.

Chapter Five

Disgruntled that he was no further ahead with his investigation than he had been the day the assignment was handed to him, Dan arrived back at Mission Beach with Marty. Both men got out of the car and silently walked toward the sectioned-off filming area, each lost in his own thoughts. As they got nearer, they could hear the sounds of splashing and shouts. Dan put his hand on his holster and picked up the pace. However, he soon found out everything was fine. The video was obviously over, and the group was letting off steam with a good old-fashioned water fight in the ocean.

Marty smiled as he watched the fun, but not Dan. He had a scowl on his face as he noticed one of the players was an unfamiliar man, one who looked like he was having a good time with Jenny held high in his arms. He was about to drop her into the surf, and Jenny was hanging on to him as tight as she could. Dan turned to look at Marty with a question on his face. However, Marty just shrugged, unable to see the face of the man with the group. Dan tried to tell himself the churning in his stomach was concern there was a new player in the game and not a jealous reaction of seeing Jenny in another man's arms.

Jenny looked over at that moment and noticed Marty and Dan. She wiggled out of the man's arms and ran out of the water. She grabbed a towel off a nearby lounge chair. Drying off as she walked, she met them halfway down the beach.

"Any luck at the theater?" Jenny asked, frowning a little at Dan's scowl, and then looking over her shoulder to see who it was directed at.

"Who's muscle boy? He's not on our list of your contacts." Dan was keeping himself under tight control; he wanted to go over and deck the guy for touching Jenny. *What is wrong with me?*

"Oh, that's Chad. The agency sent him over to be the guy in the lounge chair watching Blade in the video." Jenny smiled at Marty and secretly

smiled at Dan. Dan watched Chad, trying to hold himself in check. “Have either of you met him before? Do you know anything about him? How do we know it’s not this Runner person that got the job, just to get closer to Jenny?”

“Chad is Paul’s nephew. We requested him from the agency since we knew him and didn’t have time to do a background check on someone new.”

“Oh.” Feeling silly, Dan ran a hand distractedly through his hair. “I guess I’m a little frustrated we didn’t find anything on our trip to the theater. I should have known you wouldn’t have someone who would be a risk come to the shoot today.” Dan turned back to the two of them and tried not to stare at Jenny, dripping in her skintight suit. The sight of her was causing all kinds of unwanted thoughts to run through his mind.

“I’ll go change, and then we can get going. I’ll just be a minute.” Jenny didn’t wait for an answer. Passing Chad, she waved to him as she headed toward the dressing tent. A moment later, Chad joined the two men and watched as Jenny entered the tent.

“So, is there anyone special in Jenny’s life right now, Uncle Marty?”

“Yes,” both Marty and Dan answered.

“Whoa, just asking. Thought I’d ask her out to dinner tonight before she leaves on her tour, but from your response, I have the feeling I wouldn’t live to tell anyone about it.” Chad waved good-bye and made a hasty retreat.

Jenny joined them, saving Dan from having to explain his reaction to Marty when Chad asked about Jenny’s love life. Marty bid the two good-bye, telling Jenny that he and Paul wanted to stop by later to see her before she left on tour. She invited them to dinner, but since they had previous plans, it was agreed they would drop by for a cup of tea or coffee and dessert after dinner. Jenny reminded Dan that they needed to stop at the market to pick up something to grill for dinner.

When they got back to the condo, Dan walked Jenny in. They stopped at the desk to pick up her mail. While she looked through the mail, Dan chatted with the desk attendant, until he heard her gasp. He turned to look and saw she’d turned pale. She was holding an envelope with two fingers as if it might hurt her if she let it. He knew instinctively that it was another note. Dan pulled a surgical glove out of the back of his pocket and pulled it on. He reached out and took the note from Jenny, scanned it quickly, then held it out to her. Silently, he watched while she read the lines

Peek-a-boo, I see you.
I noticed that you did not get rid of the guard dog.
What am I going to do with you? We're soul mates. You don't need him. If he isn't gone when you go on tour,
I'll have to teach you a lesson.
Runner

Dan took the envelope, put the note in, then laid a hand on her shoulder to help steady her. He turned to the attendant.

"Who brought this in?"

The kid was visibly shaken. He stumbled a little when he explained that he'd left the desk for a minute to get a drink at the vending machine. Something he was only to do on his break when someone else was watching the desk. "When I returned, the note was lying on the desk, so I put it in Jenny's slot with the rest of her mail."

"Okay, well, tell me if you see anyone suspicious hanging around in the next day or two. And if you remember anything, no matter how small of a detail, anything can help, call me." Dan handed him his card with his cell number on it. He turned to Jenny and noticed that she had calmed somewhat. Dan took her hand and led her to the elevator.

"Are you all right? I can take care of my errands tomorrow if you don't want to be alone?" Dan wasn't sure if he could leave her, but he wanted to get the note to the lab in case they got lucky with a print.

"I'm fine. It's not the first one, you know. Let's just act as if we didn't get it. Maybe that's what this guy gets his kicks from. I've read books where the stalker loves to watch the reactions of his victims."

"You're right on the nose there. Okay, if you think you'll be all right. I'll hurry." Dan made sure she locked everything up, telling her to lock the dead bolt while he was gone and to not to let anyone in. He would get his errands done as quickly as possible, and he promised to call from his home when he was on his way so Jenny could time dinner. He was in a hurry. He wanted to get to the post office to stop his mail, but it closed at six, and it was going to be a close call.

Dan arrived at his home to find two days' worth of mail and papers on the porch. Gathering everything, he was glad that he had made it to the post

office before it closed. If the deliveries continued, it would be obvious to everyone watching his home he was gone. He would need to call the newspaper agency tomorrow. He hadn't been able to get it cancelled before they closed. Looking around, he decided he wouldn't need to clean before he left. He had done a thorough job the day before he was called into Greg's office, and even the laundry was done for a change. He decided to call Greg from here so he could talk in private. Not that he wanted to hide information from Jenny. He just thought if the captain had anything for him, it would be better without her listening.

"Hey, Marcie, how's my favorite girl?"

"Knock it off, Dan. I know Katie's your favorite girl." Dan heard the smile in Marcie's voice, and the giggle in the background that could only be Katie.

"She's my favorite *little* girl."

"I wouldn't let Katie hear you say that. She's fifteen and considers herself all grown up."

"She's growing up too fast. Both the kids are. They are making me feel old."

"God, I feel so sorry for you. How old are you now, thirty-five?"

"Ouch, I'm not that old. I'll have you know I still have a couple of years before I hit that ancient age. Well, as much as I love talking to you, Marcie, I need to speak with that reprobate husband of yours."

"That's the pot calling the kettle black. Before I put the old guy on, the kids want to know if you are still coming tomorrow night for the barbecue and the football draft?"

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it. This is the year I'm going to beat the socks off of the Kansas City guys. Do you mind if I bring Jenny? I don't want her staying alone, although she could probably go over to Rich and Marla's."

"Of course I want you to bring Jenny. I was going to ask you to. Katie and Tommy are beside themselves thinking how cool it is you get to go on tour with the great Blade. I've got to admit I'm a little excited about meeting her myself. I've listened to her CDs with Katie, and I like them a lot. If you get past all the loud music and listen to the words, she really has a lot of good advice for the young people."

"Great. We'll be there tomorrow sometime after five. Now get the old guy before he falls asleep in front of the television for the night." Dan could

hear Marcia chuckling as she went in search of her husband. They had a great marriage, the kind he and Sarah would have had if things had been different. Tonight, for some reason, the old bitterness didn't envelop him as it usually did. Tonight, he thought of Jenny and how it would be to have her to come home to, with a little redhead to be Daddy's little girl. *When did I start thinking in terms of me and Jenny having a relationship?*

"Dan, yoo-hoo, still there, buddy?"

"Oh, sorry, I guess I had some things on my mind. I'm trying to think of everything I'll need when I go." Dan hoped that sounded like a good excuse instead of admitting to daydreaming over his assignment. Greg would have a fit if he thought Dan couldn't be impartial. Cops got hurt when their judgment got clouded by getting too involved.

"I guess that's understandable. Well, I've checked out everyone, nothing new since I last talked to you. Juvie files that have been locked will take a while to find and then get permission to open. If there is anything in anyone's past that has been deliberately buried, it could take a week or two to get the information. For now, we'll suspect everyone. Most of the stage techs have checked out. There were a few illegals I had to turn over to immigration, but nothing popped out. How did it go for you today?"

Dan could hear that Greg's dissatisfaction matched his own. They usually had something to go on by now, but so far everyone's background had checked out. They had no reason to believe it was anyone she knew.

Dan explained his frustrating day, then told him about the note he'd dropped off at the station on his way home.

"You're going to have to be extra careful. Sounds like this guy might start hurting people close to Jenny to make her do what he wants. You said Marty was coming by the condo tonight. Ask him to get me a copy of the tour itinerary so I can alert the local police in each city in case you need to call in backup. Now you better get going. I don't want her alone too long."

"I was on my way. Just wanted to check in with you to see if you got anything on the background checks that could help us out. Unfortunately, you haven't had any more luck than I have. I'll talk to you tomorrow night, and I'll bring the tour itinerary. I know Jenny has a copy if I need to make a copy of hers."

When Dan arrived back at the condo, he had to knock a few times before the door was finally opened. Jenny had locked the dead bolt as

instructed.

"Hi, sorry, hope you haven't been out here long. I didn't hear you knock until I came inside to grab the wine out of the kitchen." Breathlessly, Jenny opened the door wider and let Dan enter. It delighted him how her eyes widened when she noticed the bouquet of flowers in his hand.

"That's okay. I'd rather you're locked up safe. I only knocked a couple of times. I thought these would be nice to have on the table while we have dinner. Let me set my case in the bedroom. Then I'll come out and see if you need help with anything."

"Thanks, they're lovely. I can never get anything to grow out on the balcony. I have plenty of planter boxes, but I have a black thumb, so as you can see, I have no live plants around." Taking the flowers, she headed back out to the balcony so she could tend dinner.

"Smells good," Dan commented as he stepped onto the balcony, taking in the view of the bay before he looked to the barbecue to see what Jenny had planned. She hadn't let him see what she bought at the store, saying she wanted to surprise him with her culinary talent.

"Why don't you open the wine and pour it in the decanter so it can breathe before we eat? I'm just about finished here."

Dan dutifully opened the bottle of Beaujolais, then walked over to the grill to peer over Jenny's shoulder. It did him no good. Whatever was cooking was wrapped in foil giving no clue to the contents. Jenny told Dan that, since everything was under control, he could go put on some CDs. There was a speaker out on the balcony so they could listen while they ate dinner. Since the player was a five-disc one, he picked a variety of music—blues, jazz, and a little rock and roll. When he rejoined Jenny, she'd just finished dishing up their meal. Salmon had been cooking in the foil with bacon and some spices. To go with the salmon, Jenny had tossed a salad and added rice pilaf to complete their dinner. She had made a chocolate cake for dessert, as she said the chocolate would go well with coffee.

"If that tastes as good as it smells and looks, I'm going to be in seventh heaven. You have no idea how long it's been since I've had a home-cooked meal that looks and smells as good as this does."

"I hope it lives up to your expectations, but I'm a pretty good cook if I do say so myself. I love to cook. It relaxes me. It's not often I get to cook for someone other than myself, so I did it up a little tonight."

They sat down to eat. The next little while was taken up with the task of eating. Dan was enjoying his food too much for any conversation.

Dan glanced up and caught Jenny watching him, “What?”

“Sorry, I didn’t want to interrupt your enjoyment with talk.”

When their appetites were satisfied, they sat back in their chairs to enjoy the view over the bay to Coronado.

“Great meal, Jenny, thank you. I do have a question. I’ve always heard that with fish you are to serve white wine, but the wine you chose was perfect. How did you decide?”

“During my college years, I needed a filler class, so I took a wine appreciation course. The first thing the instructor told us was no matter what anyone or any book says about what to drink, always pick what you like. You are right, white wine is good with fish. However, salmon is more of a dark fish, and I like a light-tasting red wine with it.”

“Excellent choice. I’ll be sure to consult your expertise the next time we have dinner together.”

* * * *

Jenny felt the butterflies in her stomach turn up again. When he walked in after being gone all afternoon, she was as nervous as a girl going to her first prom. By the comment he just made, she was sure that he felt something for her.

After a few minutes of companionable silence, Dan asked Jenny to tell him a little about her childhood.

“I thought you would be off duty tonight, Detective.” Jenny half smiled at him over the rim of her glass as she sipped her wine.

“The detective is off duty, but I’m enjoying a wonderful evening with a beautiful woman, and I’d love to hear a little about how she grew up.”

“Then I’d be more than happy to tell you. However, it’s not a story of a little girl and sugar and spice and everything nice. I didn’t have a whole lot of nice in my childhood. Well, maybe I did when I was very small and I still lived with Grandma and Grandpa McGregor.”

Jenny stood and walked to the edge of the balcony. She looked out, then turned to lean her back against the rail. She wasn’t sure where to begin.

“Collette was only sixteen when she had me. She was a beautiful girl,

and men, not just boys, found her very attractive and wanted her on their arm. It never seemed to matter if they were married or not, Collette was in high demand. As you can imagine, having a small child put a crimp in her style with the men. After I was born, I went to live with my grandparents. I can barely remember them. Half the time I think my only memories come from the pictures I have of them in my family album. It's funny, but I have some wonderful pictures of my first five years. Then they were killed in an accident, and I went to live with Collette. She was a stranger to me. I cried myself to sleep every night because I didn't understand why I couldn't go home. The album has no pictures in it from that point until I lived with the Dicksons.

"I never really thought about how sad that seems. It was just the way things were. Living with Collette was a big adjustment. I was no longer allowed to stay home all day and help with baking and other things. I had to go to day care, and then along came school, and I remember, even at that young age, I had a key for the door. I always came home to an empty house. Collette would come home later, probably around ten. I was too young to notice. I just knew I was terribly hungry when she got home, and sometimes she would forget to feed me because she was in such a hurry to get me to bed so she didn't have to deal with me."

Jenny turned back to gaze out at the view again and wondered how much to tell him. Some men didn't want to hear about bad childhoods. They only wanted to hear about good things when it came to a woman they might consider dating. Anyway, that had been her experience. Every time a man asked about her background, he changed after he found out about her mother and her dealings with men. It somehow made Jenny seem cheap to men. Some even thought she would sleep with anyone—after all, her mother was like that. That had been the main reason she decided she would sleep with no man unless he was to be her husband. She wanted him to be her first and last, and she hoped the man was Dan.

She felt Dan join her at the rail. Then the warmth of his arm as he wrapped it around her shoulders, it tightened in a small squeeze. She felt his encouragement to continue. Somehow he must have understood that she needed an impartial ear to listen. And he knew his reaction would be very important to her. Tingles raced over her at the fact he understood her so well after so short of time.

"As I got older, I started to go to my friends' homes after school. I wouldn't be alone, and I could usually get something to eat. I found out they all had daddies. That's when I started asking Collette where my daddy was. She told me he didn't know about me and never would. She said he was a no-good-for-nothing scoundrel and I was better off without him." Jenny stopped for a moment to get herself under control. After all these years, she still wondered who he was, where he was, and, if she could find him, would he love her?

"Again, I cried myself to sleep, wanting a daddy. One night, Collette found me in my room crying. She was upset because she was entertaining and I was making myself a nuisance. 'You should be asleep, and if you don't stop that caterwauling, I'm going to spank you, and you can go to bed without dinner for a whole week.' Then she turned and walked out. Of course I didn't remind her I went to bed without dinner all the time anyway, so what would it matter? But I muffled my cries under my pillow and cried myself to sleep. I was careful to be quiet so she wouldn't hear me.

"I started to make up stories in my head that my daddy would come rescue me and we would move to Ireland and live happily ever after. My grandma would tell me stories when I was young about where she had grown up in Dublin and how beautiful it was. Funny how I barely remember her, but I remember the stories she told me as if she'd just told them to me yesterday."

Jenny looked at Dan to see if he was listening. She had never told anyone other than Marty and Paul about her younger years. Most of her friends knew they weren't ideal, but they didn't know the real story. Rich had guessed a lot of it, but he didn't know everything. Dan was gazing down at her with an intent look upon his face that encouraged her to go on. When she met his eyes, he leaned into her and placed his cheek on her head, and she could have sworn he turned his head enough to graze his lips across her forehead. It was nice just to stand and be held by someone.

"When I was in middle school, my mother discovered cocaine. She was high all the time, and when she was high, she was happy. At first I liked the change in my mother. She paid attention to me, a little, and she was nice. Then as she took more, her behavior became erratic. I never knew from one minute to the next if she was going to kiss me or kick me. She didn't abuse me. A few times she slapped me or kicked me in the legs when she was on

an angry high. Those times, I'd take off and go to a friend's house or the library. The library became a haven to me. The librarian let me help her catalog the books and do odd jobs for her. She couldn't pay me, of course, I was too young, but sometimes she'd give me a ride home and stop and let me buy a hamburger for dinner. It went on like this until I was fifteen. Collette started bringing her dates home to get high. One night I woke up to see her latest standing in my doorway looking at me. I was very scared. I lay very still and hoped he didn't know I was awake. After a while, he went back to my mother's room, and I got out of bed and went to her room to confront him. I knew my mother would kick him out if she knew." Jenny stopped and looked out over the water. The bay was so calm and always made her feel at peace.

"He denied it, and she didn't believe you, did she?" Dan's voice shook with what Jenny thought might be rage over the frightened young girl she'd been when she went to her mother.

"I never confronted him. The door was partially opened, so I could hear them talking. They couldn't see me. So I stopped to listen a minute and plan what I would say. While I stood there, I heard him telling my mother how he had always wanted a threesome with a mother and daughter. I was a beauty, and he would pay her double until he got tired of us. I didn't listen to her reply. Instead, I ran quietly back to my room to pack everything important to me in my school backpack. The next day, I ran away to school. I loved school, and I had planned on asking my friend if I could sleep over a couple of nights, pretending my mother was out of town. By fifteen, all of the parents knew about my mother and usually let me stay with them if I wanted to. But the one time my mother was actually awake before I left for school was that morning. She noticed my pack was full, and after I left, she searched my room. There were pictures I had taken, which made her realize I was leaving. So, she called the authorities.

"They found me at school, a bit surprised. Most kids don't go to school when they run away. So they took me home. Collette was as high as a kite. Otherwise, she would never have said the things she did. They realized I could not stay, and that's when they put me in foster care, and you pretty much know the rest from there."

* * * *

Dan had kept himself in check and did not let any of the sorrow he felt at her lost childhood show. He had wanted to gather her in his arms and apologize for the things he'd thought about her before he knew her. He wanted to comfort her—something he didn't think she received when she was small. Instead he had let her finish her tale.

Dan raised his hand and tenderly ran a finger down her cheek, leaning into her. He gently pulled her into his embrace. He rested his cheek on the side of her forehead. Anger ripped through his gut toward the mother of a fifteen-year-old who would allow into her home the kind of people who would threaten her daughter.

"I hope your mother hadn't agreed with the bastard."

"I don't know if she did or not. I left before she answered. Since then, she has promised she kicked him out that night, that even as high as she was, she realized how wrong his idea was. But I only have her word, and I'm just starting to trust her a little. I'm not sure I believe her yet." Jenny shuddered against him, and then her chest expanded with a deep breath. "Enough about me. What about you? Where did you grow up?"

"I almost hate to tell you my childhood stories. At the time, I thought I was picked on, growing up with a nanny while my parents were off to who knows where."

"Hey, don't feel sorry for me. I learned to be very self-sufficient, something most kids don't learn until they go off to college. Besides, Rich's parents were great, and then of course there's Marty and Paul. I consider them to be my real parents. Our band's success was something out of a fantasy come true. Rich had started it by the time I came to live with them. It was only six months after that Marty saw us. From then on, things started to happen. By the time I was almost seventeen, I had moved in with Marty and Paul, and they have been there for me ever since. They even took me to get my first prom dress—Marty, to make sure I didn't buy a fashion faux pas, and Paul, so I didn't commit a financial faux pas. They are a bit unorthodox, but they were great parents. So tell me about the poor little rich boy."

"Have you ever heard of the Thomases from San Francisco, the financial wizards of the West Coast?"

"No, don't tell me. On your mother's side?"

"Yes, but on my father's side, my full name is Daniel Janson Thomas, III. My mother was a Janson."

"You and Paul are going to get along well. He's the reason the group is able to quit and do what we want, which is small venues and more folksy work."

"You mean more artsy-fartsy stuff?" He reached out and tweaked her nose as he said it. Then he thought to himself about how long it had been since he had enjoyed an evening as much as he had this one.

"True. Well, tell me the rest. I'm dying of curiosity to know how the golden child of the financial world ended up being a detective."

"It's pretty boring. My parents were always off to this function or that, or else they were traveling. I had a full-time nanny, then full-time tutors until it was time to go to middle school. Then, of course, it was private. They didn't want to corrupt me with the riffraff at public school. If they only knew what went on in the private school I attended. But I was interested in school like you were. I'd already decided what I wanted to do when I grew up, and I was petrified to tell my father.

"My nanny always read crime novels. I would find them and read them, or more accurately, I devoured them. My father found out and told her she was not to have them where I could get them. I became creative and watched her habits on her day off. She would go out in the gardens, where she thought I wouldn't see her. After all, what little boy played in the gardens? There she would spend hours reading. I wouldn't stay the whole time and watch, but I would check to see how far the bookmark moved so I could plan the timing of the search of the garbage can. I would fish them out and hide them, which was one thing Father never found out. Those books determined my future. I wanted to major in criminology. I remember the day I started sending off applications for college, my father was having me fill out the ones for the most prestigious financial schools, Harvard, et cetera. I did some research and found California State University in Fresno had an excellent program. Since Fresno was only about three hours south of San Francisco, I talked my buddy into going with me and went to check out the campus. I loved it, and I filled out my application while I was there. Unfortunately, I received my acceptance to Harvard the same day I received one from California State. My father was adamant that I attend Harvard. I refused, and you can imagine what happened after. My father all but washed

his hands of me. My mother kept in touch, as long as my father didn't find out.

"Then I met and married Sarah. We were both attending school. She was a business major. After that, things started to get better with my family."

The doorbell interrupted their conversation. Dan sighed, saved before he spilled everything to her, he wasn't sure he was ready. Jenny went to answer the door while Dan started to clear the table. As he walked into the living room on the way to the kitchen, he saw Marty enter followed by a tall, distinguished-looking man in his mid-fifties. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but he couldn't put his finger on it. After he deposited the dishes in the sink, he joined the others.

"Dan, this is Paul Kelly, Marty's partner," Jenny said and then watched as Paul sized up Dan, checking to see if he was good enough for her.

"The eyes, that's what it is," Dan said as he shook the other man's hand.

"Excuse me?" Paul asked.

"I'm sorry, when you first walked in, I thought you looked familiar, and up close I can see why. If I didn't know better, I'd think Jenny has your eyes."

Paul and Marty exchanged a glance, but neither commented.

"I won't take offense then. I love Jenny as if she were my own. You know they say if you live with someone long enough you start to resemble them. Maybe this proves the theory."

"It's nice to meet you. Jenny has told me how much you and Marty mean to her. I promise I'll protect her from whomever this person is who seems to be stalking her. Until today, there weren't any threats, but now we need to proceed very carefully.

"I had a call from the captain about this last note. Paul and I have decided we are going to hire more guards to go on tour with the group. And since all employees have to go through a thorough background check by the agency, you won't have to worry about it. The drivers are bodyguards, and we are going to send two more. That way, two can stay at the motor coaches at all times. We've been worried about somebody breaking in while they are doing a concert or out for dinner," Marty informed Dan.

"That sounds like a good idea. But to be on the safe side, I'll still run them through our database. I want the two of you to be careful, because

whoever this slime ball is knows who Jenny is close to, and I don't want either one of you hurt." The look on Jenny's face told Dan she had not thought of her dearest family being hurt.

"Do you think they will go after Marty or Paul?"

"No. If this person can travel, he is going to follow you on tour. However, not everyone can just leave, unless he's jobless. He might try something to bring you back to San Diego, maybe even cancel the tour," Dan warned.

"You know, I've thought about that. Maybe we should postpone the tour at least until this is over." Paul added his worry to everyone.

"No, I'm not going to let this guy bully me. We are going as planned. We'll take the extra guards, and I have Dan, whom I trust to take care of me." Dan saw Jenny smile as if she hoped he understood how hard it was for her to trust.

"Well, I guess that settles that. I know you're frustrated with the lack of clues we've came up with today, but like Jenny, I trust you too. Now, I brought over the tour itinerary for you to give to the captain. I did add one stop. We have been asked to do a benefit in Texas. It's for a rehabilitation center for minors. What do you think, Jenny? You love to help the kids at the centers."

"Yes, that will be great. Maybe Dan can talk to the kids about the law." Turning to Dan, she explained that they gave free concerts, and all the proceeds from ticket sales would go to the center to help the kids.

"I would love to. I try and get over to the center they have by the station as much as possible. I think it's great your group does things like that. I've been on a fundraising committee for our center before, and I know how hard it is to raise funds. A lot of people figure these kids are already a lost cause and don't want to 'waste' their money. It makes me angry."

"It's settled then." Jenny turned back to the other two men and offered them some of the cake she had made and some of coffee that she bought just for them. The rest of the evening was spent discussing the tour and what Dan would do to get clues to find out who the stalker was.

"Look, it's well past midnight. It's time to call an end to the discussion. Sorry, time for you two to go. I want to get up and go for a run with Dan in the morning. I haven't been for a run along the bay since the notes started. With my own personal bodyguard, I thought I'd try to get one in before we

load the bus. Hope that's all right with you, Dan?" Jenny asked.

"I wouldn't mind having a beautiful running partner. How fast can you run? I may take exception if you beat me."

"I may. I run pretty fast."

"I have a feeling Dan's going to let you win. After all, what red-blooded American man wouldn't want to run behind you?" Paul said with a wink as he stood up to leave.

"You?" Jenny asked, winking at Dan.

"Well, I guess I walked into that one, didn't I, because I would probably run behind Dan if I had my choice."

"Time to go, dear, before you make me jealous of Jenny's boyfriend," Marty added as he joined Paul at the door.

The next five minutes consisted of good-byes and hugs for everyone, including Dan, since Jenny wouldn't see her surrogate parents for a while. They usually flew into a couple of the cities on the tour to enjoy the concerts along the way. New Orleans was a favorite, but this trip it would be Memphis.

After the two were gone, Jenny and Dan looked at each other awkwardly, both a little unsure how to say good night. The evening before, they weren't on good terms. Tonight, both had discovered they had feelings for the other, not that they would admit it since it was too soon.

Dan hadn't accepted there was something between them, just that she was not what he first thought. He had very mixed emotions when it came to Jenny, something he decided he would sort out later. So, taking the initiative, he wished her a good night and told her he would be ready to run at five in the morning if she wanted to join him.

Jenny had paused by her room, and so he did the same, waiting to see what was on her mind. "Good night, I think I'll relax in the tub before going to bed."

Dan waited, but when she said nothing else, he nodded his good night. After she entered her room, he entered his. He kicked his shoes off, pulled his shirt over his head. His mind drifted to Jenny, naked in the tub. He needed something cool to cool off. Retracing his steps back to the kitchen, he was in the process of pouring himself a glass when a soft gasp started him.

"I was just getting a glass of water. Did you want some also?" Dan

asked when he saw her standing in her robe looking young and as sexy as hell, and he had almost dropped the pitcher of water he retrieved out of the fridge. He wondered briefly if she had come out on purpose to see what he would do, but quickly discarded the thought. He knew now it wouldn't cross her mind to play games as other women did. He didn't think she knew how.

Her eyes dropped to the fly of his jeans that he'd been left undone. His grip on the glass handle tightened. Luckily before she noticed his instant reaction, she hastily tilted her head until her eyes met his, and then her gaze darted away and settled on the bottle on the counter.

"Um, I, uh, I'll just have a glass of wine, to have while I soak," she stammered.

She must have been as stunned by the encounter as he was. It was a few moments before she responded to his question with a bewildered "What?"

"I asked if you wanted white or red," he said over his shoulder, the look and the vision he got from her words made him turn away, it was increasingly hard to hide his erection.

"I think I only have a bottle of red open. Here, I'll get it. You don't need to get it for me."

"No, I've already got it. I'll just pour it for you, and then we can both be off to bed." As he met her eyes, he realized that she was having the same thoughts as he, which didn't include two beds, only one.

Jenny reached out, and her fingers brushed against his when she took the glass. It seemed electrical shocks sizzled from her fingertips to his. With their eyes locked, Dan reached his other hand up to brush her hair back off her forehead, leaned into her, and gently captured her lips with his. He knew that he would enjoy the kiss, but he hadn't planned on the punch to his solar plexus. Pulling back, he dropped his hand, grabbed the glass of water he had poured, and bid a mumbled good night as he fled to his bedroom before he lost all of his senses and took her right there in the kitchen.

He had just met her the day before, for God's sake. What was the matter with him? Yesterday, he was angry at Greg for even suggesting it was time to get on with his life, and here he was, practically jumping Jenny, the person he was supposed to protect from a stalker, in the kitchen. He detoured to the bathroom instead of his room. Dan had to have a cold shower now, before he did something dumb. Then he'd go to his room and lonely bed and *not* think about Jenny. After all, he was there to do a job. He

would think about his feelings later, after the assignment was over. Now, he couldn't afford to get involved with her: it could cloud his judgment, and that could be dangerous for everybody.

* * * *

Jenny stood still where Dan left her, for what felt like hours, but was probably only a few seconds. She then took her wine and went to daydream about Dan while she was in the tub. She decided to give him time to sort out his feelings and now knew that what she had decided earlier was going to be okay. Dan was the man she had been waiting for, if she was patient. She had seen the mixture of surprise, terror, guilt, and pain in his look as he fled. He felt something for her, but she knew the mysterious Sarah played a big part for the guilt and pain she saw in his look. She knew that he needed to sort out his feelings. If she pushed, she would lose any chance with him. Instead, he would have to come to her on his own.

As she relaxed in the hot water, she hoped it wouldn't take too long for him to sort out his thoughts. Because she knew if she saw him again in those jeans and nothing else, she'd probably follow her first impulse and jump him.

Chapter Six

Early the next morning, both rosy from their morning run, Dan and Jenny tumbled in the front door just in time to hear Dan's cell phone ringing. Looking around, he finally found it in his room. Jenny went into the kitchen to grab a couple of bottles of water. When she got to the living room, Dan was just walking back from his room. Handing him one of the bottles, she waited for him to tell her what the news was, but by the look on his face, it wasn't something good.

"That was the station. They found a fingerprint on the paper I took in yesterday. I need to go check it out. What are you going to do after we load up the motor coach?"

"I thought I'd go to the studio and take a Nia class with Marla and Tessa."

"Nia, what in the world is that?"

"Well, it's a combination of martial arts, yoga, Pilates, and aerobics. It's very easy on your body. When we get back, I'll take you to one of the classes."

"Mmm, I don't know, maybe. Anyway, how long is the class?"

"It's about an hour. Do you need me to catch a ride with one of the others?"

"Only if I don't make it back to pick you up. It shouldn't take long for me to go to the station and check it out. I haven't asked you yet, but this evening I have plans to go to a barbecue at Greg's house. Then after the barbecue, it's our annual fantasy football draft. A bunch of guys are going to be there, but I know Marcie, his wife, would love to have you there for company and to save her from dealing with us by herself. Plus, Katie and Tommy, their kids, would never forgive me if I didn't bring the great Blade to meet them. What do you say? It will be fun. You could get your mind off things before we head out tomorrow."

"I'd love to go and meet all of your friends as long as I wouldn't be imposing." Jenny wanted to believe that he had asked her because he wanted her there and not because he had to take her to keep an eye on her. He was acting as if he wanted her to go, so she would take it at face value and believe that.

"Are you kidding? Marcie will be in seventh heaven to have another woman there. Most of the guys aren't married, and the ones who are, their wives feel intimidated by visiting the captain's house, so they stay home with the kids."

* * * *

Dan dropped Jenny off at the studio a little over an hour later, leaving her with instructions to go home with Marla or Tessa if he didn't pick her up. He made her promise not to go back to the condo by herself. When he got to the station, he went right to Greg's office to see what had been found. Walking in the door, he asked the question that haunted him since the news came that morning.

"Do we know who the guy is that left his print?"

"I wish I could say no, but it's Jimmy Clark, the drummer. Why don't you go over to his apartment and talk to him? Let me know what you think when you come over tonight. You are still coming, aren't you?"

"Yes, Jenny and I will both be there. I hope she likes football. I haven't had enough time to get a list of my picks ready. You don't happen to have an injured list, do you?"

"Hey, you're on your own, buddy. You better do some quick research before tonight. I'm glad Jenny's coming with you. I didn't want her alone tonight. If Runner is someone other than Jimmy, he's probably getting antsy with her leaving tomorrow."

"I've talked to Jimmy. He seems like a nice guy, and I didn't get any bad vibes when I was around him. Usually, I've got pretty good instincts. But I'll check it out before I go pick up Jenny. Do you have his address? I've got my list packed in my backpack for tomorrow."

"Here you go. Better get going. I'll see you tonight at seven. Oh, bring your own beer. You guys always drink all mine."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." Dan left after playfully making an off-color gesture

at Greg before he shut the door. However, his smile left when he got to his car and headed in the direction of Jimmy's apartment. He hoped that he wasn't wrong about the man. Jenny would be hurt if any of her friends was involved.

He parked across the street at a meter. Dan got out surveyed the neighborhood. *Nice*. When he walked into the lobby, he found a guard who had to see his identification. Then he called Jimmy to ask if it was okay to let Dan come up to the apartment. When Dan arrived at Jimmy's door, the young man was waiting for him. Dan didn't know why he thought of him as young because he wasn't much younger than Dan.

"Hey, Detective Dan, what brings you here?" Jimmy pulled the door wide and motioned for him to enter.

"I hope you don't mind, but I have some questions, and I'd rather talk to you alone, rather than when everyone else is around."

"Sit. Sounds serious. Do you want a beer or anything before we get started?" Jimmy pointed at the chair across from the couch, but when Dan declined the beer, he walked back to the couch. "Oh, probably good you didn't want one since I just remembered I'm out."

"Jenny received another note yesterday when we got home from the shoot." Dan watched for any signs that might give Jimmy away.

"I heard. I'm sorry. Is she all right?" Jimmy sat forward, his forehead wrinkled in concern.

"How did you hear?" He hadn't told anyone before he took it to the station for analysis.

"You know how it works in a close-knit group like ours. Jenny called to tell Marla, who then told Rich, who called me to let me know. Apparently, the note indicated someone might be hurt, and Jenny wanted us to be extra careful. She told Marla to let everyone know. I hope it was all right."

"I had hoped to keep it quiet, but I realize Jenny is very concerned for everyone's safety," Dan said. He wasn't pleased. He propped his briefcase on the coffee table. He opened it with a snap and pulled out a plastic bag that contained the note. He handed it to Jimmy as he asked, "Have you seen this before?"

"No. I'm not the one giving notes to Jenny. Why would you think I was?" Jimmy looked from the note card to Dan.

"Because we found a full fingerprint, and it matched yours." Dan left it

at that and sat back and waited for Jimmy to answer. As he waited, he watched a myriad of emotions, but none of guilt. The biggest was sincere bewilderment. Unless Jimmy was the best actor in the world, Dan believed that he hadn't delivered the note.

"I'm at a loss. I truly don't want to hurt Jenny, or anyone else. I have no idea why anyone would be doing this, or how my print got on the card."

"It's a pretty plain card, just a cream stock you could probably buy anywhere. Do you have any here someone could have taken?"

"I'm not really a note writer. I'm a guy, and do guys do that kind of thing? Well, maybe Marty and Paul do, but you know what I mean."

"Jimmy, I want you to know, at this point, I have no other suspects. However, I hope I'm not making a big mistake. But I believe you. Now we have to figure out why someone is trying to have me go after you. The obvious reason is to throw the suspicion off of them. It has to be someone who knows you, someone close enough to be there when you touched the card, then picked it up without disturbing the print. That would take a lot of planning and patience."

"Yesterday, Doug, Larry, and I went to one of the little shops by Mission Beach during our lunch break from the shoot. I just remembered I had to buy a present for my sister's birthday so I could give it to her before I left. I looked at some note cards. She likes things like that. She's off to college this weekend, and I thought she could use some to write home. I looked at so many I could have picked up the package with this card in it. Some were in boxes I opened and looked in." Jimmy sat up and leaned toward Dan as if to proclaim his innocence.

"You could be right, but let's get back to your shopping in a minute. I'm still stuck on the fact you are being targeted. Why not Larry or Doug? Is there something I should know? Something if I found out from someone other than you would lead me to suspect you?" Jimmy sat so long in silence Dan began to think he wasn't going to respond.

"I don't know. I mean, it happened so long ago, I didn't think anyone would remember."

"What?"

"In high school, when Jenny first joined the group, I had the biggest crush on her. I got tongue-tied every time she was around. It was a good thing I played the drums and didn't have to sing, or we would have been in

trouble. I sat there playing my drums and staring at Jenny, whether we were practicing or at a gig. I was pathetic. Then my senior prom was coming up. Jenny was a year younger, but with the guys' ribbing, I finally got up the nerve to ask her to the prom. I would have died had she said no, but Jenny knew how much it meant to me and said yes."

Jimmy stopped to take a breath, and Dan watched the red creep up the man's face as he continued.

"The date was great. It is still the best memory of high school dating I have. Even though I'm the same height as Jenny, she wore low shoes so she wouldn't be taller. Jenny is like that. She makes sure the other person is always comfortable. She knew I was self-conscious about not being taller than my date. Most of the guys back then were. Now it's not that big of deal. Anyway, when we got to Rich's house, I walked her to the door and gathered my courage to kiss her good night. It started out fine, until Jenny started to giggle. You know what that does to a guy's ego." Jimmy hung his head at the thought, and Dan hid a smile. He had been jealous about the comment Jimmy had made about the best date.

"Anyway, she apologized and told me it was too much like kissing her brother." He said the last part with so much indignation Dan had trouble not laughing.

"Can you imagine, a seventeen-year-old kid, with his hormones raging, the biggest hard-on ever, and the girl says it's like kissing her brother? I'll tell you it worked better than a cold shower."

"I'm sorry. I can understand how you felt. But why would you think something that happened, what, nine, ten years ago would make me think you were the one writing these notes?"

"Well, I'm sorry to say I didn't handle it as well as I should have. I was in love with her. I know I said I had a crush on her, but after that happened, I sort of became obsessed with her. I followed her around and begged her to go out with me again. I'd show her she felt the same way. She was confused because she'd never had a boyfriend before. Finally, Marty and Paul took me aside and told me that if I didn't stop it, Jenny was quitting the band. I went out and got high. That's where I got my juvenile record. After that, I apologized and kept my feelings to myself. It wasn't hard. Jenny never dated anyone more than one time. They usually ended up just like me, one of her friends."

"Okay, I can see where if I heard it from someone else, I might for a moment think about you being the suspect. But it still seems pretty lame. Are you sure there isn't something else?" Dan stared at Jimmy for a moment, until Jimmy squirmed under his stare and dropped his eyes.

"Okay, there was one other thing." At Dan's raised eyebrows, he continued. "There was one guy who lasted a few dates. Jenny was in her freshman year at San Diego State University. He was big man on campus and was captain of the football team, the whole nine yards. He was everything I wasn't. You know the type. Anyway, he dated Jenny a few times, and we all thought he was the one since he had lasted more than one date. But one night after a date with him, Marla found Jenny in her room crying. They were roommates. Marla said she had never seen Jenny so upset. Marla thought he had tried to rape Jenny or something. Marla had gone down to our local hangout to get Rich to come talk to Jenny since he really was like her brother. Well, I overheard the conversation and went out looking for the jerk.

"I found him with another girl at the party he took Jenny to. I made a scene and was kicked out—luckily, before I got killed. Jenny never told anyone what happened, but she hasn't dated anyone since. She has gone out in a group, but only if the single guy in the group understood it was not a date."

"I want an honest answer. Are you still in love with her?" Dan didn't know if he asked for himself or for the case, but he had to know the answer.

"Yes," Jimmy said simply.

"After all of these years? Does Jenny know?"

"Yes, after all of these years, and I think she might know. She doesn't bring it up or rub my nose in the fact she'll never be able to return my feelings. She wants me to find someone to make me happy, and maybe someday I will. For a while, all the girls tried to line me up with everything that wore a skirt. I finally threatened never speak to any of them again if they brought one more girl to meet me.

"I want Jenny to be happy. I've seen the way she looks at you, even though it's only been a few days. Please don't hurt her. She deserves to be happy. If you make her happy, then I'm happy for her." He gave Dan a look that said, *That's it*, then reached over to the phone and called Doug to come down to his apartment to talk to Dan. When he hung up, he turned to Dan

and explained that Larry had been at Doug's and that they were both coming. He hoped that between the three of them, they would remember who had the opportunity to buy the cards Jimmy had touched.

While Dan waited for the others to join them, he went over his notes but kept stopping at the notation *Jimmy still loves Jenny*. Dan would have to get over the fact. Apparently, it was not a big secret, and Jenny seemed to take it in stride. Before he could form another thought, the door burst open, and the other two spilled into the room.

"Wha's up?" Doug and Larry yelled together. Doug hopped over the couch, bounced once, then settled his legs up on the coffee table. Larry made his way to the kitchen. Coming back into the room, he looked like he had lost his best friend.

"Where's your beer, man?" Larry plopped down on the floor since there wasn't anywhere else to sit.

"We're leaving tomorrow, remember? It's gone. We drank it last night."

"Oh, right, I forgot." Larry turned in Dan's direction and waited with raised eyebrows as if to say, *What's up?* Dan thought to himself he had stepped into a room full of teenagers. Nodding to Jimmy, Dan let him explain to his friends what they were looking for.

"Well, I remember these two bodacious babes in almost nothing. They both had on G-strings and the littlest tops that barely covered their nipples." Larry had jumped up when he started talking and had been wandering around the room until he finished his sentence. Then, he just stared off into space as if he were picturing the two all over again. Shaking himself, he brought himself back to the conversation and went on. "They were awesome. I wandered over, real suave-like." Jimmy and Doug rolled their eyes at the remark. Larry kept talking, not noticing. "I asked them to go out partying with me last night. But can you believe they thought I was lying about being in the band?" He shook his head in disbelief and then brightened up as he continued. "Hey, I showed them, though. When we went back to film the last take, I saw them on the side waving at me. They found out I hadn't been lying, but guess what?" He paused as if waiting for a response. When none came, he answered his own question. "I just let them wave and didn't even let on I'd seen them. Guess they went home alone. Serves them right."

"Guess who else went home alone, you idiot?" Doug asked.

"Who?" Larry asked in bewilderment.

"You." Jimmy answered his question.

Dan shook his head, amazed how such a talented person could be so dumb.

"Oh yeah, huh, well, I bet they believe me next time." Everyone in the room let the subject drop. Seemed Larry wasn't going to get it that he was the one who lost out.

"Okay, so we know there were two girls looking around. Did anyone see anyone else shopping?" Dan asked to get everyone back on the subject at hand.

"Yeah, there was this skater dude. He was buying wax for his skateboard. He asked what was the best, so I told him that I—"

Larry's sentence was cut short when Doug broke in. Dan imagined that Larry could talk nonstop if someone didn't cut him off.

"I saw the girls. They were a little hard to miss." Doug paused to give a lopsided grin. "I saw the kid also. Other than that, I don't think there was anyone else. I looked at some notepaper for Bonnie. She likes real bold patterns, and I found the perfect note set. I thought she'd like to take some with her when we go on tour. I didn't pay any attention to what Jimmy was looking at for his sister."

"I really don't have anything more to add, Detective Dan. I didn't notice anybody else. Besides, it was kind of hard to notice anybody else with the two babes in the store. That's probably why I don't remember even looking at the kind of notes you have there." Jimmy hitched his head in the direction of the note on the table.

Larry looked, and pounced on the note. Looking at it through the plastic, he exclaimed to Jimmy, "Wow, you're the one writing these notes to Jenny?"

"No, but someone wants Dan to think I did. I like Jenny, and I see her every day. Why would I stalk her?"

"Well, people do weird shit every day, Jimmy. Last night I was watching this episode of *CSI* and—"

Once again Doug interrupted Larry. "I don't think I can tell you anything else either. I know the girls, not the bodacious ones, but our girls, had been wandering around some of the shops. I don't know if they saw anything or not."

"I think we can leave it. They probably wouldn't remember either. From now on, if you see anyone who seems overly interested in what you are doing, Jimmy, give me a call." Dan gave the three his cell number and got theirs so he could reach them as well. He would get the rest from Jenny. Before he left, he told them that they would be working together to find the stalker and that if they saw anything, large or small, that they thought Dan should know, they were to call right away.

Chapter Seven

The song ended, and Jenny saw Dan waiting. She waved good-bye to the others, then ran over to Dan.

"I arrived a few minutes ago. Are you sure that wasn't some kind of tribal rain dance? I'm going to watch the weather and see what happens."

Dan winked at her as he said it, warmth trickled over. "Hi, just let me grab my bag, and we can go." As she walked over to the side where she had left her bag, she noticed all the admiring glances Dan received from the other women in the class. Smothering a twinge of jealousy, she also noticed that he didn't seem to realize what effect he had on women. Dan spoke briefly with Tessa and Marla until Jenny joined them with her bag slung over her shoulder. After offering the other two a ride, which they turned down, Dan headed for the grocery store to get the makings of a salad he had agreed to take to Greg's that night. Jenny told him that since she was a forced guest, she would bring a nice bottle of wine and a couple of things for Greg's kids she thought they might like.

After that, the day passed uneventfully. The two of them worked well together in the kitchen getting the salad ready and cleaning out the fridge so nothing grew while Jenny was gone for the next couple of months. Since they didn't know how late they would be out that evening, they worked to make sure everything was ready for them to leave in the morning. Jenny called the building manager to make arrangements for her mail to be forwarded to Marty and Paul and for someone from maintenance to check on her place while she was gone. Dan made some calls of his own, and before either of them knew it, it was time to get ready to leave for Greg's.

Jenny was nervous knowing she would be meeting people who were very important to Dan. Also, some of Dan's friends would be there for the fantasy football draft that was an annual ritual for the group. Dan had said that Greg's family room would be the war room and there was no way to

explain it. She would just have to wait to see how it worked for herself. Football had always been a mystery to her. To her, it was just a bunch of big jocks beating up each other for money. However, it sounded like it was a big deal to Dan, and if he was going to be part of her life, and she planned on it, she would start tonight to make sense out of the mystery.

Since it was a nice late-summer night, she wore a summer dress with a light sweater in case it got cold in the evening. The outfit was complemented with her favorite pair of mules. She had a thing for shoes and always had. If she went to buy anything, she always brought home a pair of shoes. She showered, changed, and made sure her toenail and fingernail polish didn't need any touch-ups. Standing back, she decided she looked good. For once, her hair had cooperated with the tousled look she had been trying for, and her makeup was just subtle enough to show off her eyes and give the appearance of not really wearing any at all. Once ready, she started walking to the doorway of her bedroom when she remembered the gifts she had planned on taking to the kids. Stopping, she looked in her purse to see if she had everything, then returned to her closet to dig out the single they had just recorded and the T-shirt the band had signed.

* * * *

Dan had been ready and waiting for a few minutes, and sat in the big overstuffed chair in Jenny's living room thumbing through a magazine. Looking up as Jenny came to her doorway, he caught his breath. There Jenny stood, fresh and innocent. Her hair had a tousled Meg Ryan look, and she had on a thin, tiny-strapped summer dress that flowed down her body and swirled a little above her knees. Her perfectly painted toes were in a pair of sandals. They had one strap across those toes with a buckle on the side. And to finish off the ensemble, she had a light sweater knotted around her shoulders. Before he could catch his breath, she had turned and gone back into her room.

In that moment, Dan knew it was time to start to live again. He had loved his Sarah, he always would, but he knew she would like Jenny. As if in agreement, he could have sworn he heard her voice say, *"I love you, Danny, but it's time to let go. She's perfect for you. Don't pass up something so special."* He looked around. He was alone in the room, but he knew

Sarah had spoken. This time, when Jenny came back out, he stood and walked toward her. When she looked up, he smiled and held out his hand.

"You look beautiful." It was a simple statement, but he must have had something in his voice that made Jenny look up until their eyes met. Something had changed. He couldn't decide what, but he felt that whatever it was, it was a good change. She must feel it too, Jenny extended her hand and grasped his while still looking into her eyes as they walked to the door.

In the car, Dan wondered how they had made it without running into any furniture. They had not looked away from each other for a moment. He didn't even remember her locking the door. It reminded him of a movie Sarah had made him take her to, the lovers had only had eyes for each other. Dan's heart raced. To help calm his nerves, he took his time winding through the streets of Point Loma on their way to Greg's home.

* * * *

Jenny's heart was still fluttering, her palms were sweaty, and her stomach had a million butterflies. Good grief she'd never experienced anything like the connection they'd shared on the way to the car. He had to have felt the same. Didn't he?

She was glad when he broke the electric silence by telling Jenny about the fingerprint they had found and the subsequent visit to Jimmy. She was relieved Dan didn't believe Jimmy to be the person claiming to be Runner. Jenny was starting to be afraid that the captain had been right the first morning he came over, that was someone close, someone she knew. She refused to believe it was someone in her group. It had to be a friend of one of them, someone who knew what their schedule was.

When they pulled into the driveway, Jenny's nerves settled down, but she was still a little nervous about meeting Dan's friends. Waiting for Dan to walk around the car to open her door, she took in the home and the neighborhood. Although it wasn't a mansion by any stretch of the word, the homes were all well kept. Greg's had flower gardens that were tended by a loving hand, and the home was a modest two-story. As Dan helped her out of the car, the front door to the house opened, and a little blonde whirlwind of energy came shooting out. The girl stopped just short of running into Dan. She threw her arms around him and gave him a big hug.

"Uncle Dan, we thought you'd never get here." Once Dan put her back on her feet, the girl looked around him and didn't even seem to notice Jenny. Whatever the girl was looking for, she didn't see it.

"Where's Blade? Dad said you were bringing her to the barbecue."

"Katie, this is Jenny, or as you call her, Blade."

"Oh, you look so, ah, normal. I'm sorry. I guess that was rude. I don't know why, but I thought you'd be all rocked out."

Jenny had received this response when meeting young people before, so she had been prepared. "When I was your age, I did dress all *rocked out,* but I've sort of outgrown pop, and I really feel more comfortable dressed like this. An added bonus is I don't get mugged by fans at the grocery store." Jenny dug in her purse and located the CD she pulled it out she had brought for the girl in hope it would make up for her disappointment.

"Here, I thought you might like this. It's a demo CD of our new single being released when the video is debuted on MTV. Hope you like it."

"Wow, you are so awesome, thanks." She turned and started to run toward the house, then stopped and looked back at Jenny and Dan. "Do you think you could come up and look at my CD collection later? You don't have to or anything, but if you could, that would be great."

"Sure, I'd love to."

At Jenny's response, Katie smiled at them both. "I'm going to call my friend Lainie to let her know about the CD and ask her if she wants to come over and do algebra. Then she can meet you too."

Before the two made it to the door, a dark-headed boy came out. He was younger than Katie. Jenny remembered Dan saying that Tommy was ten. He was the image of his father, and not having met his mother, she would have to assume Katie took after her.

"Hey, Uncle Dan, how's it hanging?" Trying to be cool, he looked around, trying not to be as obvious as Katie had been.

"Before you ask, Tommy, this is Blade, but her name is Jenny."

"Oh." If he was as deflated as Katie had been, he didn't mention the fact.

"Here, I thought you might like a T-shirt. The entire band has signed it."

Tommy grabbed the T-shirt. Without another word, he threw his arms around Jenny and would have knocked her down if Dan hadn't caught her.

"Whoa there, young man. You almost knocked her down."

"Sorry, but, well, thanks. Uncle Dan, can Jenny help me do the board tonight? That would be so cool."

"I guess you'll have to ask Jenny if she wants to."

"Do you?" He looked hopefully at Jenny.

"I'd love to, although you'll have to tell me what to do since I have no idea what the *board* is." Jenny looked at Dan.

"It has to do with the war room for our fantasy football. Don't worry, it's nothing hard. Tommy does it every year. Let's go find the others. I'm starving, and Marcie makes the best barbecue sauce this side of Texas."

They found the others in the backyard. Greg was by the grill performing barbecue wizardry while a petite blonde was setting places at a picnic table. When Dan and Jenny stepped out on the patio, they both stopped what they were doing to greet the couple. Jenny felt like a giant when Dan introduced Marcie. She couldn't have been more than five-foot-nothing. Jenny never had a problem with her height, but every once in a while, she was reminded it was not the norm for a woman. This was one of those times, although Marcie had a way of putting her at her ease.

"My, aren't you gorgeous? Neither one of these guys let on, probably because both of them know how I would love to be tall. Well, come on over to the table. We can talk while I get everything ready."

"What can I do to help? I don't want to sit around while everyone else is useful," Jenny asked.

"Relax while you can. Tommy has informed me you are going to the war room to help out later. You'll pay your dues then. Before I forget, I'd like to thank you for the gifts you brought the children. It was very thoughtful of you. You didn't need to do that. They were thrilled you were coming."

"It was my pleasure, and besides, it helped make up for the fact I wasn't 'pop rocked out,' as Katie put it. I promised her I'd check out her CD collection later. Is that all right? Or does she have homework to do?"

"Yes to both. I told her she could do her homework with Lainie while the men did their football thing." Marcie finished placing the last plate.

Jenny figured she was about to start asking questions, so she decided to tell her about herself without being asked. "Dan told me you teach English at the college. Our group is starting up a high school for the performing arts. We need all the help we can get, so if you are ever interested in teaching at

the high school level, let me know. We all have our specialties and will devote our time to those. We started getting set up with all the legal requirements. It will still be a year or two before our dream will be realized, but we are very excited about it."

"I'm very impressed; I had heard from Katie this was your last tour, something she's very sad about. I'm sorry we didn't allow her to go to your concert, but we felt she was still a little young yet. Now I've met you, I'm sorry I made her miss it." Marcie smiled at her.

"I happen to agree. Katie is too young to attend one of our concerts." When Marcie looked at her in surprise, Jenny rushed on to explain. "The fans who attend our concerts are a little rough around the edges. They are the lost youth of today, and I was one of the lost youth when I was that age. It's the reason we try to reach out and let them know there are adults out there who care. Katie has a good, stable home life. She may like our music like other kids her age, but she is still too young to go to a concert on her own with that type of crowd."

"I like you. You are so different than what I had envisioned. Greg told me you were a nice young lady, far from what he had expected. But being a mother, I still reserved judgment until I met you. I must say you have set all my worries to rest. I'd like to invite you to come for a visit when you get home from your tour. In fact, I'd like to have a girls' lunch out with you and hear all about how Dan handles everything."

"It's a date. I was worried about meeting Dan's friends. I was afraid I wouldn't measure up." Jenny smiled, looked toward Dan, and caught his eyes on her.

In that moment, the world receded, the others faded, and there was only Dan. He seemed to be smoldering, and a slow, sensuous smile spread across his lips. A churning in Jenny's stomach started, reminding her of a thousand butterflies batting their wings. As she lowered her eyes and turned back to Marcie, she felt the heat rise, starting from her breasts, up to her cheeks.

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"Whoa, for a minute there I thought I was going to have to turn the hose on you to put out the fire," Greg said, testing the steaks to see if they were done.

"What did you say?" Dan said, pulling his attention back and turning to watch Greg examine the steaks on the grill.

"You know, when I first decided to give you this assignment, I must confess I was up to a little matchmaking. I thought this Runner person was just a crackpot fan or something. I really didn't take it as seriously as I should have. Now you're set to leave with the group on tour, and I can see that you are closer than you should be to Jenny." Greg stopped and considered Dan, but before he continued, Dan spoke.

"I can't believe you would even think for a minute I would let my feelings for her get in the way of the investigation. You've known me for years. I'll tell you right now I'm not stepping back. I'm going to find the bastard doing this." Dan turned back to look at Jenny again and watched her for a moment. She seemed to be getting along fine with Marcie; he could tell the two women liked each other. They were both laughing at something, and it made him smile just to see Jenny relaxed and having a good time with his friends.

Greg laid a hand on Dan's shoulder, which turned him back to their conversation. "I have no doubt you'll catch the son of a bitch, or I wouldn't have put you on it to begin with. I just don't want to see you hurt again. I wanted you to find another woman who could bring you the happiness you lost when you lost Sarah. I just want you to be careful of your feelings and not let any distractions put you or anyone in danger."

"I…" Dan didn't want to examine his feelings for Jenny yet, so he let the words die before he said something he couldn't take back. Instead, he'd step back and make sure their relationship wouldn't go any further until this was all over. Then he'd take her out, and they could see where things went. So instead of telling Greg he was falling in love with her, he told his good friend not to worry because he had things under control. He just hoped he wasn't lying to himself or Greg.

"Hey, I'm hungry, Dad. When are you going to be done? The rest of the guys are going to be here to do the draft soon," Tommy called out from the table where he had joined his mom and Jenny.

"Okay, slugger, dinner's up. Hope you have a big appetite because you're going to need it to eat this steak I grilled for you," Greg called back as he dished the meat onto a platter and took it over to the table.

Dan settled in by Jenny, laying a hand on her knee and giving it a

squeeze as he gave her a playful wink. Katie came to join them, and after what seemed like only a moment in time, it was time to clear up. Marcie shooed Jenny off when she tried to help, telling her she needed to go with Tommy so he could explain how the draft worked.

Tommy led Jenny down the two steps to their family room, situated off the side of the kitchen. It was a cozy room with a big, overstuffed couch and a big-screen TV. For the night's activities, there were a couple of computers set up, and on one wall, a big roster poster hung. Tommy explained the stickers with names of players would be placed under each team.

"See, everyone has their own team name, and they pick players for their fantasy team." Tommy pointed to the magazines his father had collected that had all the team rosters with the players' statistics.

"But, I thought guys just picked a team and bet on them for the season." Jenny, not being a big sports fan, was having trouble understanding why they would pick players from different teams. Tommy rolled his eyes at Jenny's lack of understanding.

"They pick up to twenty-eight players, a player for each position, until they have their own team. Then each week, the players get points, and the fantasy team who gets the most points wins for the week. At the end of the season, the team with the most combined points wins." Tommy took Jenny's hand and pulled her to the table under the poster on the wall. He showed her all the names were on stickers and arranged in piles according to position.

"See, here are the quarterbacks. They're on the yellow stickers; blue are the running backs; white, the receivers; orange, tight ends; and green for the kickers. Each team has to have two defensive teams, and they are on the pink stickers."

Jenny raised her brows at the color used for the defense. Tommy ignored her look and continued his speech. "When the guys tell you a name, you find the name under their position and put it under the right team. Don't worry, they'll tell you what position to look under, or I will if they're pulling your leg." Tommy showed her a chair where she could sit while she was waiting between rounds.

"Sounds complicated to me. You're going to have to help me if I get stuck, okay?" Jenny looked at the board and noticed there were eighteen rounds to be picked out of the available twenty-eight; they were going to be there all night.

Dan entered the room with a dark-haired man trailing him. When Dan saw Tommy, he grabbed him around the waist and tickled him until he was giggling so hard that he couldn't catch his breath. Finally, taking pity on him, Dan let him go and turned to Jenny with a smile.

"Hope this fella's been giving you some good advice on how this works, because when it comes to the war room, it's serious business. This here is Adam. He's with the fire department, and a couple of his crew will be here too. There are some from our precinct and a few guys in other states. They instant message us with their picks."

"Nice to meet you, Adam. I'm a little confused by football in general, so have patience with me." Jenny shook Adam's hand. *You have a nice firm grip to go along with that firm body*.

"If Master Tommy is helping you, you'll do just fine. We are pretty informal. Don't let Dan scare you. Dan and Greg are the only ones who have ever come to blows over wanting the same players. I'm sure they'll be on their best behavior tonight, with a lady present." Then, turning to Dan, he continued, "Where did you find a beauty like this that was willing to go out with an ugly guy like you?"

"I had to bribe her. I told her I was taking her to see men hotter than the Chippendales." Dan laughed. He took his seat and began to go over his notes on the players he planned to pick.

Jenny noticed that as the men started to arrive, they all had magazines with markers and several notebooks. She could tell each had studied his players and was ready to fight to get the ones he wanted.

Soon, everyone had arrived, and it was time to start. Greg had a hat ready to put all the names in. He let Tommy draw each for the order of the team pick for each round. Dan would be the first to pick. Each team captain had two minutes to decide on his pick for each round. Getting down to business, Greg started the timer for Dan's two minutes.

"Reggie Bush, running back with the Saints," Dan finally said after what seemed, to Jenny, like two hours.

Walking over to the table, she looked for the blue stickers and found the names to be in alphabetical order. She found the correct player then carefully stuck it under Dan's team. He had picked the name Dan's Fins for his team name. Apparently they all had a team name that was a variation of a favorite football team, Dan's being the Miami Dolphins.

Jenny sat looking around the room. *Bonnie would be like a kid in a candy store with all these prime male specimens.* Not one had an extra ounce of flesh, which completely dispelled the doughnut theory connected with San Diego's finest. Bringing her attention back to the serious business of football, she realized Adam was giving her his next pick. Because Adam was the jokester of the group, she should have been prepared.

"Let's see." Adam studied his worksheet. Then with a smile he looked at her. "I pick George Jetson."

Jenny stood and walked to the bench. After looking through the piles several times, she turned to ask what position George played. As she turned, she caught sight of Tommy holding his middle and rolling around the floor laughing. Narrowing her eyes, she put her hands on her hips and started to tap her foot. She recognized the tune Dan was innocently humming while he grinned right along with the rest of the big galoots—the theme song from *The Jetsons*.

"Funny, ha ha, I get it. Fool the dumb girl." Jenny wasn't going to let them get the best of her.

"Sorry." Adam's grin was anything but remorseful.

Instead of replying, Jenny just stared at Adam until he squirmed. He cleared his throat and finally gave his correct pick. Things went smoothly for a while until, after a couple of more rounds, it came time for Adam to pick again. Intently studying his paperwork, he didn't even look up when he gave his pick.

"Thomas Jones, running back for the Jets." he said. But Jenny was not going to be the brunt of any more jokes.

"Very funny, you think I'm going to fall for that again?" she asked.

"What do you mean? I want Thomas Jones." Adam looked up, and if Jenny hadn't known better, she would have thought he honestly didn't know what she was talking about.

"You want Tom Jones? Next are you going to sing 'What's New Pussy Cat?'" Jenny remained seated, determined not to be goaded to go look for the name she knew wouldn't be there.

Tommy jumped up from the floor, walked over to the table, took a sticker from the running back pile, and stuck it under Adam's team. When Jenny dared look, to her dismay, the name on it was none other than Thomas Jones. She looked at Dan, who was trying not to laugh, and then around the

room. Everyone looked as if any minute they would break into laughter. Luckily, before she could sink to the floor in embarrassment, Marcie saved the day.

"I think it's time I rescued you from these Neanderthals. I have a nice hot cup of tea with your name on it," Marcie said from the doorway.

Jenny stood up so fast the chair fell over. "It's all yours, Tommy. Thanks for letting me help." Jenny practically ran past Marcie in her hurry to leave the room without any further embarrassment.

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Marcie followed Jenny into the kitchen at a more sedate speed. With a small smile, she watched Jenny march to the counter to where her tea waited. She picked it up, took a scalding gulp, and yelped when it burned her tongue.

Marcie had watched the action before calling attention to herself. Jenny had been holding her own among the camaraderie of the men. Everyone was having a good time. She knew the guys didn't care that she didn't know the names of the players. They were just flattered to have her join them. Jenny didn't have a clue that they were nervous about meeting her. She had been trying so hard to make a good impression on Dan's friends that she didn't even realize she was a hit the minute they found out she was a genuine person and not a prima donna.

Marcie would have to sit down with Jenny to make sure she didn't stew over something so trivial as not knowing a player's name. Marcie lived in a house where football was on whenever there was a game to be found, yet she didn't know all the players' names herself.

"Here, have a seat with the girls. Come, girls, slide and make room for Jenny," Marcie said as she looked at the girls, who eagerly complied.

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Jenny spun from the counter to look at the teenage girls she'd marched by without notice. She was horrified to think she had reacted so strongly over such a stupid thing.

"Sorry, I'd love to join you. What are you two working on?" Jenny sat

at the offered chair, deciding to let the other issue go and enjoy the rest of the evening with the women.

"Jenny, this is my friend Lainie," Katie introduced, and then rushed on before Jenny had a chance to reply. "We are doing our algebra, which we hate and I don't understand. When we get finished, Mom said, if you wanted, we could take you up to my room to look at my CD collection."

"I think that sounds like a plan," Jenny said then turned to Katie's friend. "Nice to meet you, Lainie. You girls are in luck. I just happen to not only love algebra, but I'm pretty good at it if I do say so myself."

For the next hour, Jenny forgot about her embarrassment and helped the girls with their homework. It had been a long time since she had done any math, other than accounting for her own finances. It was almost like being back in school, which she loved.

"Well, that was fun. You girls knew your algebra a lot better than you let on. I thought I was going to have to do it for you, but you both did fine. I think you just wanted me to sit here and watch," Jenny said as she sat her pen down. "How about checking out your CD collection now? Sounds like the guys are going to be duking it out for a while longer."

Jenny stood and, stretching, smiled at Marcie. She really liked the other woman. *Hopefully, I'll have a chance after the tour to become better friends with this wonderful family.*

Katie and her friend needed no further encouragement. They headed up the stairs at the speed of light, leaving Jenny to follow in their footsteps. Katie's room turned out to be a teenager's dream come true. Jenny looked around and was tickled to see a life-size poster of herself on the back of Katie's door. The bed was a pink ruffled canopy, one Jenny would have given anything to have when she had been Katie's age. There were various pictures of Katie at all ages dressed in everything from ballet tights to baseball uniforms. Plenty of trophies went along with the pictures.

"Wow, looks like you have been a busy girl growing up. Look at all these trophies. How does it feel to get a trophy?" Jenny asked.

"You've won several music awards over the years. And you're asking me about a stupid trophy. You're kidding, right?" Katie asked.

"No, I'm not. I always wanted to compete in sports and things growing up, but my mom told me she couldn't afford it. So I joined the choir, thinking there wouldn't be anything that required money. However, I still

had to work for the neighbors, taking out their garbage and such, to save up for a special blouse to wear when we performed. But it was worth it. I learned I loved to sing. I guess since I had to earn it on my own, it meant so much more," Jenny explained as she continued to study Katie's room. Finally spotting the valued CD collection, she sat down and started to look over the CDs.

"I guess it felt like an acknowledgment of a job well done. Isn't that how you feel when you win a music award?" Katie asked.

"Yes, that's true. You sure are a lot wiser than I was at your age. How did you get that way?" Jenny threw her arm around the younger girl, since Katie had plopped herself next to Jenny, and gave her shoulder a squeeze.

Lainie still hadn't said anything. She seemed content to sit and listen to her friend. Jenny noticed the lack of response from Katie's friend and was determined to include her in their conversation.

After a while, Tommy came to the door to let Jenny know the football draft was coming to a close and Dan wanted to know if she was ready. By then, she had drawn the girl out enough to learn she was shy and thought she wasn't very smart. That was not true, and Jenny had set out to make her aware of the fact. Standing up to follow Tommy, she hoped she had accomplished it. Lainie was a lovely girl who just needed to be drawn out of her shell.

Dan was sitting on the couch in the living room discussing his strategy at catching the stalker when Jenny entered the room. Both men stopped and looked up at her. Dan smiled and came to a stand. Greg smiled but remained seated. Jenny thought he seemed preoccupied.

"Hi, did you have a good time with the girls?" Dan asked, stretching a hand out for her to clasp as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Yes, it's nice to be able to chat with young people who have so much going for them. Most of the young girls I deal with have had such a hard life. It's wonderful to know there are some good families out there who are just plain normal. Not dysfunctional like most families are today," Jenny answered as she automatically took Dan's hand. Jenny saw Greg raise his eyebrow toward Dan and knew he hadn't missed her action. Trying not to sigh, she almost let Dan's hand drop. *I'll let Dan deal with his captain.* It felt too good to have someone to lean on.

"Time we got going. We have to leave early in the morning. Thanks for

the great food. Sorry I took your number one player, but that's what happens when you draw such a shitty round." Dan chuckled at his humor.

"Don't laugh yet. He could get injured during preseason," Greg shot back as he pulled himself out of the overstuffed chair.

Jenny watched the man struggle a moment before he finally managed to stand and wondered why Greg had bought the big chair. As soon as Greg was out of the chair, he started to walk toward the couple, only to be stopped by the two charging dogs—Eddie first, with Trixie nipping at his heels. Eddie's target was clear. With a little squeal, Jenny jumped behind Dan, and not a moment too soon. Eddie landed paws-first on Dan's shoulders and brought a big *humph* from Dan as he was knocked back a step.

"Do you have to be so excited about everything, Eddie?" Dan rubbed the big dog's ears, and Jenny came around and joined in. Whispering in the dog's ear, Jenny then bent to pick up Trixie and give her equal attention.

"Tommy," Greg called. "I still have a few things to discuss with Dan before they take off, and I don't need these two energetic balls of fur romping around while I'm trying."

Tommy came into the room with a few of the guys who had lingered in the family room to check the line-ups. "What, Dad? It's not time to go to bed." Tommy words came out in a complaining tone.

"I know. I just want you to put these two out for their nightly ritual so I can have a few more words with Dan."

"Oh, okay, I can do that." Tommy gathered the dogs, which was not an easy task when they both wanted to stay for more of Jenny's attention. He finally got them herded outside.

"Dan, I'll walk you to your car while Jenny and Marcie say their good-byes. I'm sure we'll have plenty of time for you to fill me in on the rest of the details for your trip." Greg didn't wait for Dan to answer but went out the door expecting Dan to follow.

"Jenny, you heard the boss. I'll be outside whenever you are ready." Dan gave her a swift kiss on the cheek, then straightened to follow Greg. She had no idea why he had kissed her. It almost seemed as if it came naturally to him. *I'll examine that later.*

Jenny blushed slightly when she turned to see Marcie watching with an indulgent smile.

"Well." Jenny cleared her throat. "Thank you for a wonderful evening.

You have a wonderful family, something to be very proud of." Jenny felt comfortable enough to lean over and give Marcie a hug. It was something she reserved for close friends and family, mostly Marty and Paul.

"It has been a real pleasure meeting you. I will admit to being a little nervous. After all, you can't miss all the rag magazines at the grocery mart." Marcie laughed as she returned the hug.

"I look forward to asking your advice on our school when I get back. I'm going to work on a strategy to lure you to teach for us," Jenny said as she finally turned to leave.

"I don't think you'll have a problem there. What you have told me so far has me very intrigued. I think I'm feeling a little restless in my current position." She followed Jenny outside, only to come up short when Jenny stopped with a gasp.

"What's on the car?" Jenny asked as she began to hurry toward the car. Something was hanging on the antenna looking suspiciously like a noose.

"Stay there, Jenny. Greg and I are taking care of it." Dan tried to block the note and the noose, but Jenny was having none of that.

"This is my life, Dan. Just because you're here to catch the bastard doesn't mean you need to shield me from things. I need to see what is going on so I can be prepared for whatever happens."

"She has a point, Dan. She has a right to know what is going on. However, since she contacted the police to investigate, that part is out of her hands. Jenny, remember that when you read this note," Greg warned as Jenny reached to pick up the note that had been stuck to the hood next to the noose.

"No, just read it without touching it. We need to check for prints." Dan took her hand, but instead of letting it go, he held it while she read the note.

Copper,
Take this as a warning. I'm not out to hurt Jenny. I love her.
She's my soul mate, not yours. Leave her before anyone gets hurt.
Tomorrow she leaves. Let her go alone.
I'll be watching.
Runner

Jenny turned to look around the neighborhood, not certain what she was

looking for. Runner was sure to be gone, but he'd been there. It was getting more real to her, and she didn't like to involve others. She turned back to let the men know she wanted to let the investigation drop before someone got hurt. Then Greg's words came back to her, and she realized what he meant. It was out of her hands. Dan would be going with her the next day.

"I can see your brain working, Jenny, no matter what you say. The gauntlet has been dropped. Runner has just made this personal," Dan said, but before Jenny could say anything, Greg cut in and said it for her.

"I'll pull you off this case faster than Clint Eastwood can draw his gun in a spaghetti Western if you think you're going to let this guy make this personal between the two of you." Greg glared at Dan.

"I get your point, and you don't need to worry. As I said earlier tonight, I won't let myself get distracted," Dan said.

Jenny waited for him to expand on what he meant by *distracted*, but it seemed it was just between the two men.

"Jenny, I need to finish up here before we leave. Do you want to go back inside to wait?" Dan asked.

"No, I'll stand out of the way, but I want to know what is going on." Jenny moved to the side of the yard, where a large pine tree stood.

At first, she thought a branch was poking her in the back, so she moved a little to her left, but the branch seemed to follow her. She was about to turn to see what was poking her when a husky voice stopped her.

"Don't turn around." someone said. It was low, as if the person was trying to disguise his voice, yet it had a breathy quality, one Jenny thought sounded vaguely familiar. The gooseflesh started at her toes and worked its way up to her scalp.

"What do you want? All I have to do is call, and Dan will be here before you can get away," Jenny threatened.

After a low chuckle, the person replied, "Not if you don't want to see a nice little hole in his forehead."

"Okay, I'll keep quiet. I repeat, what do you want?" Jenny had started to shake. She had trouble keeping her voice steady, but she'd be damned before she'd let this jerk know he frightened her.

"I just want you to know I don't want to hurt you or anyone. I've loved you since I first saw you all those years ago in school. Jenny, please get rid of the big copper. You don't need him. As soon as your tour's over, we'll be

together. I've got a surprise, a paradise for just the two of us," the voice crooned in her ear.

Jenny thought he must be nuts to think she'd welcome his surprise.

"I can't stop Dan from going. I tried, honest, but Captain Martin said the investigation was out of my hands." Jenny couldn't stop shaking. There seemed to be a cold draft coming from the voice, as if it were evil.

"You ought to try again," the evil person stated. Even though Jenny waited, there was nothing more. Jenny whirled and looked frantically through the pine trees on the side of the house, but couldn't find anyone. Jenny was so noisy in her search she caused a distraction for the men.

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Finally, Dan came over to see what was going on.

"Jenny?" Dan called her name as he got close. She didn't seem to hear, but instead kept frantically beating the bushes looking for something. When he called her name for the third time, he was close enough to see she was as white as a sheet, as if she had seen a ghost. Grabbing her arm, he pulled her toward him. The minute he touched her, she started to struggle until she looked at him and realized it was him. Dan pulled her into his embrace and felt the shivers through her body.

"What's wrong? What are you looking for?" he asked her as he pushed her back a little so he could look into her eyes. "It's okay now. Nothing's going to hurt you. Can you tell me what happened?"

As Jenny stepped toward him, he heard her intake of breath to calm herself before snuggling into Dan's embrace. Then in a whisper so low that Dan had to strain to hear it, she told him, "He was here."

"Who was here?" At first, Dan didn't understand what she meant. However, before she started to explain, he had figured it out. Dan continued to hold her, stroking her hair as she told him what happened. When she was finished, he called Greg over to explain, and no sooner than he had finished, Greg ran to his house to get the others who were still in the house enjoying the cake Marcie made for the occasion.

Without too much grumbling, the group gave up their treat to hit the neighborhood to see if they could track down Runner. After hearing what the bastard had said to Jenny, Dan had an errand of his own. He knew his

friends would do a thorough search, but he had a feeling they wouldn't find anything.

"Greg, let me borrow your car. I've got a hunch I need to check out." Then turning to Jenny, Dan said, "Jen, please stay here with Marcie. I'll be back as soon as possible, and I promise to explain everything." He kissed her on the forehead and caught the keys Greg tossed his way, then went to the little sports car Greg loved.

Dan had a feeling Runner was still trying to set up Jimmy by saying, *"I've loved you since I first saw you all those years ago in school."* He was hoping to find Jimmy home with an alibi to prove he'd been there. He still wasn't willing to believe his instincts where Jimmy was concerned could be so off.

This time, Dan opted to pull into the garage instead of parking across the street from Jimmy's apartment. He went to the security guard first before checking in with Jimmy. Showing the guard his badge, he began his questioning. At first, the guard didn't want to cooperate. Dan could tell the man really liked Jimmy and didn't want to say anything to get him into trouble.

"Look, I know Jimmy lives here, and contrary to what you think, I'm not here to cause problems for him. If anything, I want to prove he didn't have anything to do with what is going on." Dan hoped the guard would be more forthcoming after his little speech, and after a few more minutes, he got what he came for. The guard verified Jimmy had not left, at least not by the guard gate, since he came in over two hours previous to Dan's visit. This meant Jimmy could not have been at Greg's house. However, there was always the back way out. Telling the guard not to announce him, he went to pay a little visit.

As Dan knocked on the door, his hopes started to sink when Jimmy didn't answer. He had been knocking for a good five minutes, and neighbors started to open their doors to find out what the racket was. Dan assured them he was concerned for Jimmy and just wanted to make sure he was all right. One woman, as she closed the door, muttered something about rock stars always causing trouble and she had voted not to have him lease in the building. Finally accepting defeat, Dan started to turn just as the door opened and a tousled head peeked out of the door.

"God, what are you trying to do, knock my door down?"

Dan whirled around at Jimmy's voice. Giving him the once-over, he shoved his way into the apartment.

"Do come in," Jimmy stated as he slammed the door.

"Sorry to disturb you. I didn't think you'd be in bed this early." Dan pointedly looked at his watch, which read barely past ten.

"I think I ate something bad at lunch. Larry took me to a farewell party his friends were throwing him at a little dive down by the beach. I haven't been feeling so good since. So, I thought I'd make it an early night since we're leaving at the crack of fucking dawn." Jimmy plopped himself down on the chair, electing not to sit on the couch by Dan. Then, he just glared and waited for Dan to explain.

"I'm thinking it could have a little to do with what you drank, not just the food. You smell like you just crawled out of a tequila bottle." Dan noticed the place was cleaned and bags were packed sitting by the door waiting for the next day's departure.

"I'm thinking you could be right."

"Sorry, but I was hoping to catch you exactly how you are," Dan stated, and at Jimmy's bewildered look, he continued to explain the events of the evening. "So, whoever this Runner person is, I think he's still trying to shift the focus on you. Have you thought who it could be? You would know who may have a grudge against you more than I would."

"I honestly can't think of who it would be. But I've been here ever since I came in. I haven't so much as peeked out of my door," Jimmy promised.

"I believe you. I have a plan. I'm not going to explain it to you, because whoever this guy is, he knows you. You may not realize you give things away, so I'm going to keep you in the dark. I want you to be as surprised as everyone else. Just go with my lead, okay?"

* * * *

"I'll do anything to keep Jenny safe. I'm glad you believe I couldn't or wouldn't do anything to hurt her." Jimmy doubted after this conversation he'd get much sleep, so he stood and asked Dan if he would like some coffee. He wasn't surprised when Dan declined and just bid him a good night and left.

Jimmy wandered into his kitchen after Dan left to mull over the events

that happened since he found out about the notes. Once again, he came up blank. He had no idea who could be stalking Jenny, and he hoped Dan would find the son of a bitch soon.

* * * *

By the time Dan made it back to Greg's, forensics had finished dusting his car for prints and removed the noose and note for evidence. He entered the house and found Jenny surrounded by his surrogate kin and friends. He wished he was as close with his real folks and thought maybe he and Jenny were meant for each other because they seemed to have the same problems with family. Though his problems were far different from Jenny's—at least he could say he had not come from a neglectful home.

"Hi, Jenny, how are you holding up?"

Jenny jumped at the sound of Dan's voice, and she threw him a startled glance. "I'm doing all right. Everyone has been vying for a chance to see who could take my mind off, ah, everything."

"Sorry I left you. It turned out to be a wild-goose chase. I take it no one around here found anything either?" Dan didn't expect an answer. Had anything gone down, someone would have called.

"No, the bastard got away without a trace. He's like a phantom. You know he's been there, but you find no evidence," Greg said with disgust.

"Just what I thought. Greg, before Jenny and I head out, could I talk to you and finish going over everything?"

Greg stood at Dan's request and followed him outside, leaving Jenny to once again say her good-byes to everyone.

"So, where did you run off to?" Greg asked as soon as they were out of earshot from everyone.

"Everything is pointing to Jimmy, or so this Runner person wants us to believe, and I'm not buying it. I raced to his place to see if I could catch him in the event I was wrong," Dan admitted.

"Well, was he there?" Greg waited for him to continue.

"Yes, the guard said he'd been home for two hours. There is a back way out, so I went up unannounced. At first I thought he was gone, but he finally answered. Looked like he had tied one on and I woke him up. So, either he got back before I got there and is an incredibly good actor or he really was

in bed. I opt for the second."

"Okay, so who do you think it is?"

"I haven't got a fucking clue, which really pisses me off. I know it's someone who is very close to Jenny or someone in the band. I have a plan. I'm going to wait until the right moment, and then I'm going to arrest Jimmy. I want everyone to think I have found my man, and I just told Jimmy to follow my lead. I didn't explain. I'm not going to tell Jenny. I just hope she can forgive me when she finds out I didn't tell her the whole truth." Dan sighed as he ran his hand through his tousled hair.

"I know this is an assignment for you, but I can also tell you have feelings for this woman. Telling half-truths and lies is never a good way to start a relationship. Even if it is for the best of reasons," Greg offered.

"I know." Dan turned to watch as Jenny came out of the house onto the porch. Then he finished in a low tone so Jenny wouldn't hear the rest of his conversation to Greg. "But I'm afraid she will say something that will get back to the bastard who is out to get her and it will land her right where he wants her. I can't let that happen." He left Greg after that statement to get Jenny and take her home.

"Hey, ready to go?" Dan asked as he hopped up onto the porch beside Jenny.

"Yes." Jenny then turned back to Marcie. "I've had a lovely evening, despite all of the drama. I will see you when I get home. I'll call, and we'll do lunch."

* * * *

"I'd like that," Marcie answered as she stretched her small frame up to give Jenny a big hug. Then she turned to Dan and did the same. With tears in her eyes, she waved the two off as they got into Dan's car and drove off.

"Well, what do you think, Greg? Did you do the right thing getting those two together?" Marcie linked her arm through Greg's as they both turned to go into the house.

"I don't know yet. The jury's still out. Ask me again when this is all over. I thought this was an easy one, that it was just a fan. Looks like I was wrong. I hope no one gets hurt." Greg sighed as he locked the door for the evening. Then, he turned and gave Marcie a kiss and set off to hustle up his

two children to bed. He felt the need for his wife tonight, and the sooner the children were tucked into bed, the sooner he could curl up with her in his arms in their own bed.

Chapter Eight

Dan unlocked the door, led the way inside the condo, then secured it again. Although not expecting to find anything, he had Jenny stay by the entrance while he checked to make sure no one else was there.

"All clear, as I thought, just wanted to make sure. Ready for bed?" Dan asked as he took Jenny's hand to lead her toward her room.

"I don't know if I can sleep. Can I ask you a huge favor?" Jenny turned to look into Dan's eyes.

"Sure, as long as it doesn't take too much energy, I'm beat."

"No, not too much." Jenny smiled. "I don't seem to be able to get warm. I just keep shaking. I was hoping that you would hold me for a while."

"I think I can handle that. It's been a long night for you. First, putting up with all the guys' shenanigans and then, afterward, when *he* showed up. Come on into your room. Let me turn down your bed." Dan led the way.

Jenny had relented and left the curtains open to show off the view of the bay. The lights twinkled on the water. Leading her to stand by the window, he put his arm around her and held her as they both looked out. After a few minutes, they turned at the same time to look at the other. Words were lost as they looked into each other's eyes. As if in slow motion, Dan lowered his head and tentatively touched her lips with his. When she offered no resistance, he wrapped his other arm around her and tightened his embrace, touching his tongue lightly to hers.

She didn't know how to describe the range of emotions she had been through that day. She just knew she was ready for the day to end, and she hoped that Dan wouldn't leave her alone in her lonely bedroom.

Jenny couldn't believe the feelings she was experiencing. She had never been with a man, contrary to the rag magazines' opinions. She felt butterflies in her stomach and a tingle that began at the bottom of her feet and traveled the length of her body to the top of her head. She was short of

breath, and her lips were on fire. Breaking contact with Dan, she gulped in air. With all the courage she could muster she whispered, “Make love to me.”

* * * *

Dan wasn’t sure that he had heard her, so he waited, looking at her until she repeated her request. He knew she was not as experienced as he had first thought. As far as he knew, there was only the one football jock in college, and from what the others had told him, that hadn’t worked out. If he did make love to her, he knew that it wouldn’t be the same as with the other women that he’d been with since his Sarah died. With Jenny, it would be special. He paused and, looking at her, knew that this would be a step toward a permanent relationship. He wasn’t sure he was ready. But when she lowered her eyes as if she were embarrassed by her request, he knew that he wanted to make love with her as much as she wanted him to.

“Close your eyes,” he whispered. When she complied, he leaned down and kissed first one eyelid, then the other.

Leaving her standing, he went to her dressing table where a candle sat and lit it. Then he dimmed the lights; with that accomplished, he looked around for a CD player. Once he found it, he selected a few blues CDs and put them into the changer. Soon soft music filled the air. Dan walked back to Jenny, who was standing with a small smile on her lips.

Stepping up to Jenny, he placed both hands on her shoulders. As he began to kiss her face, ears, and neck, he gently pulled the thin straps of her sundress down her arms. Once the straps left her arms, he let the dress slide to the floor. Stepping back, he looked his fill as she stood still in brief, white, lacy panties, with her sandals on her feet and her dress pooled at the floor. He didn’t think he had seen anything as beautiful as she was at that moment.

Dan knew he couldn’t turn back, even if his life depended on it. He was falling in love with this woman, fast, and he had to protect her because he couldn’t lose another woman he loved. They had tonight, but he would have to make it clear that on the tour, it had to be all business, for her safety and his peace of mind. But tonight he would give her the world.

* * * *

Jenny thought she would feel nervous, but opening her eyes, she saw Dan looking at her. She had nothing on but her underwear, and she could tell by the look on his face that he liked what he saw. Just when she started to feel a little cold, he stepped back and, starting at her shoulders, began to kiss her. He worked his way down, first one breast and then the other. His sensuous mouth traveled lower to her sensitive stomach. The sensations that his mouth was causing rippled over her skin. He linked his thumbs into the sides of her panties at her hips and brought them slowly down to her feet, trailing kisses all the way. Once there, he lifted one leg and took one side of the panties off, careful to leave her sandal on. He then repeated the same with the other leg. He stood and took a step back and again looked at her, and with a playful grin, he leaned over and nibbled on her ear. Then the world seemed to tilt as he placed one arm behind her back and put the other under her knees to lift her.

Throwing her arms around his neck to keep from falling, she smiled into his eyes. When he laid her on the bed, he stepped back. Then pulled his T-shirt over his head, after which his eyes didn't leave hers until he was standing by the bed naked.

Jenny's eyes traveled the length of his body, and she tried not to be overwhelmed by the sight of him. As he bent a knee and came down onto the bed, she opened her mouth to let him know that he was her first. Before the words left her mouth, he cut off anything that she might have said with a soft kiss. Losing all thought, Jenny let the new sensations take over. Hesitantly, she reached out to trace her fingers down his arms, feeling his muscles quiver in their trail. Leaning up, she began to nibble along his collarbone as he had done to her.

With a deep groan, Dan caught her mouth with his to begin her lessons in love, though she knew he didn't know it. His lips traveled down her shoulders, then along the inside of her arm, down to her fingers, where he kissed each finger and sucked gently on the end, which caused waves of tingles over her.

Next he found her ribs and traveled downward until he reached the outside of her thigh and ended at her toes. He must have decided he couldn't leave the other leg unattended for he did the same to that thigh. When he

finished, he paused and she watched his expression until she began to writhe on the bed.

Jenny didn't know what he was doing to her, but whatever it was, it was driving her mad. She couldn't catch her breath, and the place between her legs was throbbing and begging for attention. As if reading her thoughts, Dan began to kiss her navel and travel downward with his mouth. When he reached the juncture of her thighs Jenny had just been thinking about, she felt new sensations so intense that she almost came off the bed. Then she was lost in a whirl of pleasure unlike any she had ever known.

* * * *

Dan couldn't wait any longer, and leaving behind Jenny's soft nest of curls, he leaned over and captured her mouth as he entered her with one swift thrust, only to stop in surprise when he realized he was her first. Holding still, he brought himself up to look down into her eyes to make sure this was what she wanted. Jenny looked up at Dan, gave a smile, and wrapped her arms around his neck to pull him closer. Needing no further encouragement, Dan began slow, steady thrusts until he could feel Jenny beginning to urge him on by pumping her hips to increase the tempo. Waiting until Jenny was ready to join him, he brought them both to paradise.

After what seemed like hours, Jenny opened her eyes to find Dan gazing down at her. She smiled and leaned up to kiss him. Not wanting to get distracted, he eluded her, which brought a frown to her slightly swollen lips.

"What's wrong?" Jenny demanded.

"Nothing's wrong. Don't pull those up. I'm enjoying the view," Dan gently pulled the sheet back down to expose the beautiful set of breasts she was about to cover up.

"Then why didn't you let me kiss you?"

"Because I didn't want you to sidetrack me before I asked one very important question." Then he dropped a light kiss on her forehead.

"What?" She pouted a little as she waited for his question.

"Why didn't you tell me you had never been with a man before?"

"It didn't really come up. Then when I was going to tell you, you took my breath away, and I forgot all about it. I'm sorry. Are you upset?" Jenny asked.

"Don't be sorry. I'm not. I like the idea that I'm the only one you've been with. It makes it all the more special." He took a finger and lifted her chin so he could see her eyes. "Jenny, it was special." With that, he leaned down and kissed her deeply, and they lost track of time as they made love again.

"Tell me about Sarah, Dan. I know she was someone very special. I saw a picture of you with a beautiful, very pregnant woman when we were at Greg and Marcie's tonight. Marcie said I needed to ask you if I wanted to know." Dan felt Jenny tense as if waiting breathlessly for his answer.

"Yes, Sarah, my wife. Remember, I told you we met going to the university. I joined a study group for a class, and she was a member. We became very good friends. At first, we would joke about dates with other people, never dreaming about dating each other. Then she asked me to go with her to a dance because she didn't want to go alone. Being the gentleman that I am, I said yes. Then after that we just sort of drifted together. It was a long, easy road to love for the two of us. When we finally got married, she had a degree in marketing, and I had one in criminal psychology, so I joined the force, and she helped her friend open a boutique." Dan scooted up in the bed to join Jenny against the headboard. He put his arm around her and pulled her close as he continued.

"Before long we found out she was pregnant. I was beside myself with happiness. I started taking odd jobs and working late whenever I could to save up for the nursery. Maybe if I hadn't been so determined to earn extra money we really didn't need, they would be alive today."

"Why, what happened?"

"Sarah had been working part-time at the boutique her friend owned. One night, she arrived home only to find out she'd left her bag at the shop. If I'd been there, I would have driven her back to get it, or gone for her. However, no, I was at my second job. She turned around and went back, and that's when the drunk, driving over ninety miles an hour, ran a red light. The doctors assured me Sarah didn't suffer, that the impact was so great that she had died instantly, along with our unborn son. It didn't make it any easier." When Dan finished, he turned his head to gaze out over the bay of lights.

Jenny reached out and brought his face back to look at her. Leaning into him, she gently kissed him, and from there she continued to make slow love to him. Their lovemaking continued throughout the night. They cuddled and

whispered about their hopes and dreams, and then one or the other began the lovemaking all over again. Before either of them knew it, it was early morning and time to get up. Jenny was sleeping when the alarm went off, and Dan reached over and turned it off so it wouldn't wake her. Deciding to let her sleep a little longer, he got up to go get a drink in the kitchen.

He retrieved the water out of the fridge. He began to pour the liquid into the glass abruptly pulled the pitcher back and let it plop down onto the counter. He couldn't believe it. How dumb could he be? He was very meticulous with the other women he'd been with, yet last night, he hadn't used any protection. In this day and age, that could be a very lethal moment of forgetfulness. On top of that, he usually picked a woman who was wise to the world and wanted no strings attached, just both consenting adults.

Therefore, if for some ungodly reason he forgot to use protection, there wouldn't be any surprises nine months down the road.

God, I feel like a sixteen-year-old caught with my pants down. He picked up the glass to drain it in one gulp, and as he set it down with a bang, he heard Jenny's voice behind him.

"Wow, you must have worked up a thirst," Jenny said in a sleepy voice as she stifled a yawn. She padded toward Dan, then reached around him for another glass and poured herself a little from the pitcher.

"That's what you do to me, Red," Dan said as he tousled her already tousled hair.

"I'm glad. That makes us even." Jenny smiled at the pet name he'd dubbed her with. "You know it's funny you call me that, when I was younger I would daydream about my father. In them, he always called me Red. What time is it?" Turning to look at the clock, she gave a little squeal when she realized everyone would be there in little over an hour.

"Yeah, that's what I thought. We better hustle, or we won't be ready," Dan said. As she sidled up to him to get a good-morning kiss, he held her off and explained, "Red, we can't let this continue during the tour. Last night was incredible, so don't give me that hurt look. But we have to make sure that I keep my concentration, and believe me, little one, you are a big distraction. More importantly, we can't let Runner know that our relationship has progressed. Since my cover has been blown from the beginning, as far as anyone can know, my only interest in you is in a professional manner."

"Well, I think it's best we make good use of the time we have left. How 'bout I wash your back and you wash mine?" No sooner had the words left her lips than she followed them with a soul-searing kiss.

"Let's go," Dan said as soon as he was able and gathered her into his arms to lift her and carry her to the master bath, where they spent a wonderful hour, which left them little time to get ready before the others arrived.

Dan was standing by the door waiting for Jenny when someone knocked on the door. Opening it, he found Bonnie and Tessa on the doorstep.

"Where's Jenny?" they asked in unison and came into the room before Dan could invite them. Shaking his head, he shut the door.

"She should be out in just a moment. Are you two excited about the concert in Vegas or the shops?" Dan asked. He already had Jenny's answer, and he wanted to see if these two agreed.

"I love to perform in Vegas. The energy level is so high, and everyone gets into the concert with us." Tessa sat on the armrest of the overstuffed chair as she answered the question.

"Performing in Vegas is just like anywhere else, and you know it, Tessa," Bonnie said in disgust. "I can't wait to finish this tour. The rock scene became a drag years ago for me."

"So what are you excited for then, Bonnie?" Tessa asked.

"I'm ready for this to be over. I told everyone just to end the group and start with a new tour, with our new style. But no, all of you said our fans deserved to have one last concert. Sometimes you guys can be such sentimental saps."

"They do, Bonnie. If it weren't for our fans, we wouldn't have the money to start the school or have the luxury to change our focus and choose small venues like the folk music festivals."

Before Tessa could finish, Bonnie broke in. "Oh, give me a break. It's our fans' *parents* we have to thank, and now they have to fork out more money for our last concert because the little punks will just have to come see us." Bonnie wandered over to Jenny's door and impatiently knocked to hurry her up.

"Leave Jen alone. She'll be out when she's ready," Tessa scolded Bonnie.

"Jenny's always on time. What were the two of you up to last night?"

Bonnie turned and gave Dan the once-over, which made him squirm at the accuracy of her remark.

"Bonnie," Tessa exclaimed. "Sometimes I wonder how you can be so brazen."

"Bonnie." Bonnie mimicked. Just then, Jenny opened the door and joined the group.

"What did I miss?" Jenny asked looking from Bonnie to Tessa.

"Nothing. Let's get going. Bonnie's getting restless as always."

Jenny smiled at them; took first Bonnie's arm, then Tessa's; and started to walk toward the door. Giving Dan a sunny smile as the three passed him, she asked him to bring the bags, and the three left him to do just that.

In front of the condo, two large motor coaches waited for the group. Dan left the building in time to see Jenny disappear inside the larger of the two. Deciding that he must be riding in the same one, he followed and entered. When he did, he could only give a silent whistle when he looked around. It was nothing like any motor home he'd ever seen. It had a hall down one side with three doors, two of the doors led to small but functional bedrooms. The other to a good-sized bathroom, considering it was limited space. He assumed correctly that he, the driver, and the new bodyguard would have to make do in the living area. He hoped there was a long enough couch because it wouldn't be a very pleasant trip if his feet had to hang over it each night.

"Sorry, buddy, not enough bedrooms. You get the bunk above the drivers," Rich said as he came up and pounded Dan on the back.

"Lovely," Dan muttered. Taking the two steps that led to his home for the trip, he found to his surprise more than enough space for his long legs.

"Hey, Dan, where did you put my bag?" Jenny called from somewhere in the back.

Dan picked up the bags and followed her voice then found her in a room large enough to accommodate a double bed and a small closet. It was decorated with candles and aquamarine colors, which reminded Dan of ocean breezes.

As he put down the bags, they heard the driver call that they were off. The plan was to make it to Las Vegas in time for lunch and shopping. The guys usually took themselves off to a sports bar, which ordinarily Dan would want to do too. But he wasn't on a vacation. He'd have to tag along

with Jenny and play fifth wheel to the girls. He hoped they wouldn't take delight in dragging him through every lingerie shop they could find.

"Nice digs," Dan said. "Pretty fancy motor coach, I don't think I've ever seen one this big."

"When we're on the road, it's too big of a pain to check in and out of hotels, and more costly. We have a lot better things for our money. We're not used to having an extra two people on board. I hope it's not going to be a problem for you to sleep out on one of the sofas that convert into a bed." Jenny looked him over in a suggestive way and tilted her head. "Of course, you could bunk in here with me."

"Don't tempt me." Dan grinned. "I'll be fine. Rich told me I get the coveted space above the drivers instead. Where do you want these bags?" He put them on the foot of the bed as she directed, then left to go find out the travel plans from the driver. He needed to start his game plan if he wanted to catch Runner.

Up front, he introduced himself to the two drivers, who were burly and rugged. No one would mistake them for anything other than what they were, bodyguards.

"Dan Janson. Hope you don't mind me tagging along this trip?" Dan extended his hand to the guard in the passenger seat since the other was busy negotiating the large coach onto Interstate Eight, their route until they reached Interstate Fifteen for the rest of their trek to Las Vegas.

"No, we've been briefed not only by our company, but also by Marty. And I believe I'm more afraid of him if something happens than of being fired." He laughed as he extended a hand toward Dan. "I'm Tom, and this is Jason. We will be taking turns driving. Thank God. I'll feel safer when he's taking a nap." This comment earned him a scowl from Jason.

"Ha, ha. I've been driving this rig for over five years, with no complaints. So keep your mouth shut. Dan, nice to have you on board. I've grown fond of these kids over the years, and I welcome your help." Although Jason referred to the group as kids, Dan didn't think he could've been more than a few years older.

"I'm curious. How does a detective from the San Diego PD get jurisdiction to travel over the country?" Jason asked as he checked both mirrors.

"You know, that was a question I asked my captain. Apparently Jenny's

mother has a rather strong connection to the mayor, who pulled a few strings. I have a list of contacts in all of the cities we will be passing through. They've all been alerted to the possibility that I may call them for backup. They'll actually have jurisdiction, but they have agreed to let me head the investigation in their areas," Dan replied as he made himself comfortable in the sitting area directly behind the driver's seat. He spread his files across the tiny table there. Before he got any paperwork done, Marla and Rich joined him in the sitting area.

"I see you're getting settled in," Marla observed as she sat with her husband opposite of Dan.

"Yes, I'm going to go over the itinerary again to familiarize myself with the contact names for each city. Also, Marty provided me with a layout of all the concert venues and how the dressing areas are situated." Dan leaned over and handed Rich the file so he and Marla could take a look. He wanted everyone to be extra cautious.

"We've actually performed at most of these venues on other tours. If you have any questions about these, let me know. I'd love to help anywhere I can. The sooner we get this bastard, the faster we can relax and enjoy our lives." Rich absently rubbed a knuckle over his wife's cheek.

"I just might take you up on that," Dan said before pausing to listen to faint sounds of music coming from Jenny's room. He'd thought when she didn't join them she'd been taking a nap.

Noticing the direction of Dan's gaze, Marla enlightened him. "Jenny usually takes advantage of the travel time to write music. She's busy trying to write some folk songs for our new venture."

"She told me this is the last tour for Blade, but you'll continue on a much smaller scale doing music festivals and such." Dan knew this group, as talented as they were, would go far in whatever they set their minds to.

"Yes, and we're all excited to try something new. Our time is going to be full with the school. But keeping active in the music arena, however small, will help us keep sane." Marla placed a hand on her stomach just as it growled, then continued. "Why don't you go get Jenny? I'm going to fix us a breakfast snack to hold us over until we get to Vegas. We usually get a large lunch at the Stage Deli. I hope you don't mind our cooking arrangements?"

At his inquiring look she explained to Dan and Tom, who sat listening

from his passenger seat in front, that everyone took turns making meals when they were on the road. Jason, a veteran to the routine, was always delighted to try out recipes when it was his turn. The only stipulations were that all meals were nutritious, and if the chef needed a fat or sugar fix, it would be a side dish for only those who wanted it.

"Sounds fine. I cook a pretty mean omelet, and my coworkers have been known to travel many miles for my barbecued brisket. So watch out if we have any cooking contests," Dan joked.

"That sounds like a great idea." Jason piped up from his lofty driver's seat.

"What sounds like a great idea?" Rich wanted to know.

"Have a cooking contest with the guys. I have some great recipes I've been gathering to bring on this trip. Let's make it interesting. What should the winner get?"

"Well, since it was sort of my idea," Dan stated, "I'll think about what a good prize would be for the winner. How many meals would be included? Do we get more than one chance?" Dan was getting into the idea. He'd better watch it. He was starting to feel like this was a vacation.

Tom added his two cents. "I think it needs to be a well-rounded contest, meaning each of us has to prepare three meals. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and the one who is the most versatile wins."

"I want in on this action. You security and detective types aren't the only ones who can cook." Rich joined in. Then he turned to his wife. "Right, Marla?"

* * * *

"Ah, yeah, you cook sometimes." Marla couldn't believe what she was hearing. Her husband cook? Before she could continue her thoughts, her cell phone rang. "Hello?"

"Hey, what you guys doing?" Larry asked from the other coach. "I'm bored. Everyone is playing cards. They won't let me play because they think I cheat. So I thought I'd check on you guys."

"We were just discussing a cooking contest for the males of our group. I think I like the idea. With them doing all of the cooking, Jenny and I will only have dishwashing duties," Marla informed Larry.

"Hey, that sounds fun." Then apparently without moving the phone far from his mouth, he shouted to the card players, "Marla said the guys are going to have a cooking contest. Do we want in on it?"

Marla sighed as she pulled the phone away from her ear in protection. She didn't remember asking the others to join. That would mean stopping and all eating together. Although she had never mentioned it to anyone but Rich, she had always been glad for the separate space and time away from the others. She didn't count Jenny, who had always been like her sister. However, as much as she loved the others as dear friends, they always seemed to zap her of her energy.

"We're in," Larry informed Marla. Then he proceeded to badger her about all of the rules and when the contest would start.

"Looks like the gals will be the judges for each coach for your contest. Then the two top from each will have a cook-off," Marla announced when she finally managed to get Larry off the phone.

"That's all right. The only one who might give us any competition is Doug. The other two will be lucky to boil a hotdog," Rich answered.

"Larry said Bonnie volunteered to print up some type of scoring sheet for each of the meals. And Tessa said she would give extra-high scores for any men who cooked low-calorie dinners." Marla laughed as she added the last piece of information from the other coach. Tessa, as usual, worried about her diet.

"Dan, before we got sidetracked on the subject of cooking contests, you were going to go see if Jenny wanted to have a breakfast snack," Marla reminded.

* * * *

Dan stood and said to Marla, "That's right. I'll go see what she's up to. I haven't heard the guitar for a few minutes, probably a good time to interrupt." Dan turned to walk toward the back. He gave a quick knock and opened the door without waiting, Dan stopped in surprise at the sight that greeted him.

Jenny sat on the edge of the bed with a needle poised just above her thigh ready to give herself a shot. Conditioned from years of suspicion, Dan automatically grabbed her wrist to stop her.

Jenny looked up at him in surprise. The look on his face must have told her what his first thought was. A split second later, her expression registered hurt. “Dan,” she said quietly. “Do you really think I’m on drugs?”

Looking into her eyes, he realized that he had reacted from instinct from the job and hadn’t thought about the person. He knew there had to be another explanation. Letting go of her wrist, he answered her question.

“No, I’m sorry, just cop instinct. I trust you. You don’t have to explain. When you get finished, Marla is making us a breakfast snack to hold us until we get to Vegas.” As he turned to leave, it was Jenny’s turn to catch his wrist. Without words, Jenny picked up the bottle of insulin and handed it to Dan so that he could read the label.

“Well, this certainly explains all the instructions from Marla about healthy menus. You’re a diabetic,” Dan said. It was a statement, not a question.

“Yes, sorry, I’ve been so wrapped up in everything else I neglected to tell you.”

“I understand. I’m really sorry for jumping to the wrong conclusion. I can’t promise I won’t ever make an ass out of myself again, but I’ll do my best not to. Deal?”

He watched her finish what he had interrupted and then took her to join the others. The rest of the trip to Las Vegas seemed to sail by, with everyone planning their meals and Marla and Jenny teasing the guys about their big egos.

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The motor coach pulled into the Circus Circus RV Park. Dan looked in question at Jason and asked, “This is where we’re staying?”

“Yes, throws the fans off. The kids get in the costumes, or whatever they call their getup, at the concert dressing rooms. So we leave the coaches here, walk through the casino, and cross the road to where a limousine will be waiting to take us to the MGM,” Jason explained.

“That’s a very good plan. Do you do that at all of the venues?” Dan asked.

“This is a pretty easy town to get away with something like this. Other places, like our next stop, Phoenix, it’s a little more noticeable when we

come into town. It's a little over a five-hour drive from here, so we'll be getting there mid-afternoon tomorrow. We'll stay in one of the surrounding areas, and someone will pick them up close by, but not at the actual spot where we'll stay. Same routine throughout the trip."

"Good. Will one of you stay with the coach at all times?" Dan asked.

"Yes, and the other will tag along with you and the kids. That way you will have two extra bodies to help watch your back," Jason said.

"That will be helpful. I'll keep all of you in the loop whenever I get information from the captain back at the station. He's keeping me updated on all background checks. Paul and Marty are keeping a watch out for anything they might come across. We also have a car following them to make sure they're safe while we are gone. However, we don't expect them to be in any danger. It's just a precaution." Dan wanted Jason to be well informed so there would be fewer surprises. The coach door opened, halting any further discussion.

Larry jumped in to announce they were ready for lunch. "What's the game plan?" he asked as he plopped himself down on the chair closest to the table where snacks were out for anyone to enjoy.

"I'm going to tag along with the women to the Caesars shops. I guess we will meet up with you later." Dan waited for replies.

"Man, I always want to go with them instead of going to a sports bar. But Bonnie won't let me. She says I'll embarrass them." Larry moaned and rolled his eyes.

"You will." Marla placed her fisted hands on her hips. "You'd probably want to play with the panties in the lingerie shop."

"Yeah, doesn't that sound like more fun than going to a sports bar?" Larry looked at Dan for confirmation.

"I think, under the circumstances, maybe we should just order a pizza and hang out here until we need to leave to get ready." Rich shook his head when several groans rolled around the coach.

"No, I don't want the routine to be broken. Then Runner wins." Jenny turned to Dan as if waiting for him to agree.

"Well, then I think I'll tag along with the women too. I've always wanted to have lunch at the Stage Deli. Every time we're here, all I hear is how good their food is. This time, I'll get to see for myself." Rich grinned at Dan, at the same time inviting himself.

"Great, let's all go together for a change." Larry's eager tone almost made Dan laugh.

Bonnie had followed Larry to the coach. "Only if you understand that you are not going into the shops with us, Larry."

"Thanks for taking all the fun out of my day." Larry pouted as only he could.

"You'll live. Let's go, or we aren't going to have time to eat and look around. We've only got a few hours before we have to be at the MGM." Bonnie flung the door open and left as if expecting everyone to follow.

Chapter Nine

Marty was in a hurry. As always, he had several errands to run before going into the office to go over paperwork for the group. On his way to his car in the garage, he breezed past the two hunky cops who had been assigned to follow him and waved. He climbed into his car, popped his favorite Streisand CD in, and pulled out without waiting to see if they were following. *What a waste of taxpayers' money to have them baby-sit me.* But if it made his girl feel better, he'd put up with it.

Driving down Rosecrans, weaving in and out of traffic to get to the post office, Marty didn't worry about the distance he was putting between himself and the officers. With the stereo blaring and Marty singing at the top of his lungs, whether someone following him was the last thing he had on his mind. When it happened, he was totally unprepared for the impact.

"My God." Marty cried out. He couldn't believe—the car behind him had rammed his. The force of the impact had knocked him forward, causing his head to hit the steering wheel. He could feel blood trickling down the side of his face. Shaking his head to clear his vision, he struggled to pull the steering wheel back and fought to control the car. When he finally had the car in the correct lane, he risked a look in the rearview mirror in time to see the maniac bearing down on him again. *Thank God, no one is in either lane on each side of me*. Quickly looking to the right, he determined that he had enough room to get over. As he did, he saw the car behind him following too close for comfort. Looking for a place to turn off the street where he couldn't be followed, he wasn't prepared again when the driver raced by, sideswiping the full length of his car.

With shaking hands, Marty steered the car to a safe spot to pull over. The other driver was long gone. He realized as he turned the key off that he hadn't even tried to get the license number. Everything had happened too fast. Before he had time to calm himself enough to get out of the car and

check the damage, the two officers assigned to follow him were knocking on the window.

"Sir," Officer Nonen called out as he rapped on the window glass.

"Do you think he's in shock?" Marty heard young Officer Cage ask.

Finally, Marty motioned for the two to move away so he could get out. When the door opened, the two officers stepped back to allow Marty room.

"Whoa, there, sir," Officer Nonen said as he put a hand on Marty's shoulder and gently pushed him back into the seat. "Looks like we better call an ambulance to check out your injury."

"But, I want to see how my baby is," Marty insisted as he tried to get out of the car again.

With a worried look at Cage, Nonen motioned for him to look around the car.

"I can't find a baby, sir," Cage addressed his partner.

"Mr. Kelly." Nonen looked at Marty, leaving the statement as a question.

"Yes, it's Kelly, but everyone just calls me Marty," Marty answered, misunderstanding the question. Kelly was Paul's last name, and Marty changed his name legally to Paul's years ago since they considered themselves married.

"No, I mean the captain didn't tell us anything about a baby. We didn't see you leave your home with one either," Nonen said. "Maybe you hit your head harder than you realized."

"No, no, no…" Marty shook the officer's hand off of his shoulder and again attempted to climb out of the car. "My car, I want to look at my car. She's my baby. I've never let anything even touch her, and now look what's happened to her."

Officer Nonen finally let Marty out of the car, only to have him shriek and practically collapse at the sight of his dear *baby*. Gently, both officers took an arm and helped Marty to sit back in the car.

"Oh my, what am I going to do? My poor baby," Marty wailed dramatically, which caused the two officers to shake their heads and look around as if they wished they were someplace else. People were starting to gather and stare at the scene.

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Paul noticed the relief on the officers' faces when he pulled in behind the patrol car. He parked his late-model Lexus directly behind it.

Paul had been chatting with the officer assigned to "watch" him, waiting for Marty at the office, when the call came in about the accident. Concerned, Paul rushed to the scene with his trusty watchdogs following.

"Marty. Are you all right? What happened?" Paul asked as he brushed the two officers aside to reach Marty. Paul leaned into the car to examine his partner. After a few moments, he conceded to himself that Marty, dramatic as always, was just fine. He did have a nasty gash, but Paul determined it was superficial. Marty was more shaken up about his *baby*.

"What happened?" Paul asked the question a second time to the officers who were following Marty.

"Well, Mr. Kelly was in a hurry, and I'm afraid he got ahead of us. By the time we caught up to him, the other car had just sideswiped him. We only got a description of the car. Unfortunately, we weren't close enough to get the license number," Officer Nonen explained.

"We did call in the description. With the damage on the front and side, I'm sure it will be easy to spot," the younger Officer Cage was anxious to add.

However, contemplation on catching the driver was short-lived. No sooner had Officer Cage completed his comment, than the radio blared for pickup. The young man quickly went to answer the call.

"That was dispatch. They found the car abandoned over on Mission Beach Boulevard. They're canvassing the area, but so far, no suspects. None of us got a good description of the driver. Mr. Kelly said that when he looked in his rearview mirror, it looked like he had a ski mask on," Cage announced when he returned to the group around Marty's baby.

"What am I going to do about my poor baby?" Marty came to lean against Paul as he asked the question.

"Dear, you know that we have good insurance, and we will have her repaired in no time," Paul told Marty in his most soothing voice.

"But she'll never be the same." Marty sighed.

"The most important thing is that you're all right. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't have you around. I'd die of boredom." Paul gave Marty a squeeze, more to reassure himself than Marty.

"Sir, I think we better let Captain Martin know what happened. I'm sure

this was planned, to make a point. The last message to Miss Blade told her to tell the police to back off or someone would be hurt," Officer Cage said.

"Oh. He's right. Paul, we have to call Jenny and let her know that I'm fine. You know that bastard has probably called and made it sound like I'm dead or something," Marty cried out.

"Let's call her right now. Then we can get to all the rest of the paperwork or whatever needs to be done to get through here." Paul pulled out his cell phone and dialed.

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Jenny had just finished the best deli sandwich that she'd had in a long time and didn't know whether she needed a nap or a walk. The sighs from the rest of the group made her think they were having the same thoughts. Noticing the show in the forum shops was about to commence, Jenny made the suggestion that they sit and relax a minute. She'd always loved to watch the Greek gods seemingly come to life.

However, before the show began, a cell phone in someone's bag began to ring. As everyone around looked in bags, purses, pouches, and so forth, Jenny found it to be hers.

"Hello?" she asked.

"It's your fault he's hurt. I told you to get rid of the coppers," a low voice whispered.

"Who's hurt?" Jenny demanded. When no answer came, she tried another question. "Who is this?" She asked loud enough for people to turn and stare.

"Here, let me have that." Dan took the phone from Jenny. But the call had ended. Quickly using his phone, he called the number to the contact in the Las Vegas Police Department the captain had provided. When he finally answered, Dan asked him if he could get the records of the cell calls to Jenny's phone. After answering a few more questions, Dan disconnected and turned to Jenny.

"Okay, Jenny, I've got someone checking. Now tell me what was said." Dan placed a protective arm around her shoulders as he steered her clear of the crowd. Of course her friends followed, concerned with what was happening.

"He said someone was hurt and it was my fault," Jenny said as she leaned her head on Dan's shoulder. She let the tears run down her face unchecked. She couldn't help but think if she had just done what Runner had said, no one would be hurt now.

"Jenny, you can't blame yourself. We have everyone you love covered. I'm sure it's just a bluff," Dan said as if he read her mind.

"It has to be Marty or Paul. Everyone else is here." Jenny looked around at all of her friends to make sure no one was missing. They were all there.

Then Jenny's phone rang again. Since Dan still had it in his hand, he answered. "Yes?"

"Dan?"

"Yes, is something wrong?" Dan asked.

"I'm glad you answered. I didn't want to scare Jenny, but there has been an accident. Everyone is fine. Marty's just a little shaken up. He has a nasty bump on the head. *Baby* took the brunt of the damage, though."

"That's good to know. Jenny just got a call from Runner telling her it was all her fault that someone got hurt. But we didn't know who," Dan told Paul. Then he handed the phone to Jenny.

"Hi, darling girl. Sorry, we wanted to get to you first." Paul got no further.

"Are you okay? What happened?" Jenny was shaking with emotion.

"Marty had a little accident. He's shook up, but poor baby got banged up. But that's why I have insurance."

"What happened?" Jenny asked again. She listened while Paul explained what had happened. She knew that he was making light of it so she wouldn't worry. "I think we should stop the tour and come home."

"No, if we do that, we'll just be playing into Runner's hands. We have protection, and no one was hurt. You have double the protection as you usually do. Let Dan do his job, and everything will be fine. You'll see," Paul assured her.

"If we don't stop the tour, then I think it best that I send Dan home, so at least I'll have taken it out of the hands of the police. We'll still have the extra bodyguards." Jenny didn't want Dan to leave, and by the look on his face when he heard her statement, it wasn't going to be an easy task to convince him.

"No, Jenny, I'm not going to let you do that. Marty and I are fine. It was

our fault this happened. We didn't think it was necessary for us to be protected, so we treated it too lightly." Jenny heard a pause, and then Marty came on the line.

"Honey? It's Marty. What Paul said was the truth. You know how I am when I'm driving with Babs. I got to singing, and I didn't realize that I lost the two cute fellows who were following me. I promise to keep them in sight at all times from now on."

Jenny was silent, thinking of what to say next. "I'm so glad you're okay, Marty. I don't know what I'd do without either you or Paul. I really wish you'd let us come home. But since it doesn't look like that's going to happen, we'll stay. If anyone else gets hurt, though, we're pulling out." She wasn't happy, but her hands were tied. No one seemed to agree that it would be best if they called everything off and went home.

"Jenny, let me talk to Marty a moment. Marla, will you take Jenny to the restroom? I think she needs to splash a little water on her face." Dan steered Jenny toward Marla as he spoke.

Jenny felt Marla take her arm, but she felt as if she were sleepwalking. A weight of guilt rested on her shoulder; someone she loved had been hurt, and she felt powerless to stop more loved ones from getting hurt.

"Jenny, here you go. Do you want me to help you? Your face needs a little repair, girl. Can't have that hunk of a man out there seeing you like this, can we?" Bonnie offered in her usual blunt manner. She and Tessa had followed the two to the restroom.

"Thanks, guys, you really don't need to worry. I'm okay. I'm just worried that one of you is next. What would I do if I lost someone I loved?" Jenny said as the waterworks started again.

Bonnie put a comforting arm around Jenny to let her cry it out. The two women were of the same size, and Jenny's head rested comfortably on Bonnie's shoulder. Taking the offered handkerchief from Tessa, Bonnie handed it to Jenny.

"Here now, I think that's enough boobing for now. The men are going to think we decided to camp out in the restroom." Bonnie urged Jenny toward the sink so she could rinse her face.

"Bonnie's right. Let's get your face repaired and join the others. We need to get going so we aren't late for the preconcert rehearsal," Marla added.

"Okay, I can take a hint. It's over and done with. No one was hurt, and it's time to let it go. I'm sorry to be such a pain. But it's my fault all this is happening. If I'd just kept those stupid notes to myself, they would have remained harmless. He probably would have gotten tired of sending them and stopped by now." Jenny dried her face off, then pulled her makeup out of her bag to repair the damage. The others were right. No one was going to let her back out of the tour. So it was time to get going. She'd talk to Dan after the concert. Maybe she could get him to agree to have the police back off.

When they joined the men, there was a man talking to Dan while the others milled around looking bored. When they saw the girls, Larry came over to fill them in on what was happening.

"Hey, took you guys long enough. But your face looks better, Jenny. Now people won't stare," Larry stated. Then he continued before anyone could respond. "That guy with Dan is a cop. He's the contact from that list the captain gave him before we left. They've already pulled your phone records. The call came from a pay phone. Man, I could have told them that. Like this Runner nut's going to call from his own phone, duh."

"I'm sure they had that figured out themselves, Larry. But they needed to find the area so they could hopefully catch the guy before he got away." Jenny shook her head as she answered Larry. Sometimes she wondered how he made it through life.

"Jenny's right, Larry. They wanted to get there while he was still in the area. Unfortunately, we don't have a description, so the police don't know who they're looking for," Dan added when he joined the others.

"Detective Markowitz just left to go help canvass the area where the call came from. He said it came from a bank of pay phones by the women's restroom at the Excalibur. They've been asking everyone in the area if they saw anyone using the phones around the time your call came through. No one saw anything. The restroom is in a low-traffic area of the casino," Dan explained.

Jenny felt Dan looking at her. "We need to call off the investigation."

"Sorry, it's out of your hands, and mine, for that matter. While all of you are rehearsing, I'll call the captain to see if they had found anything yet. I think it's best if we keep up with the routine. Go find your gear or whatever you guys need to take to the concert venue and let's be on our

way."

* * * *

They're never going to catch me, those idiots, Runner thought as the group headed off toward the exit of the Forum Shops. It was easy to hire people to do the dirty work; money could buy anything. Runner knew that Jenny couldn't do anything about stopping the investigation now. *Silly girl, you're going to be so surprised when you find out who I am.* Runner felt Jenny would know they were soul mates and everything would be fine in their paradise, which Runner had the finest carpenters build. The recording room that had been designed especially for Jenny was going to blow her mind. But the time had to be right. *They expect me to do something else when I find out the coppers are still around. Let's just confuse them. Give them a little time to ease into a false sense of security, and then wham, I'll strike again*. Chuckling at the humor of it all, Runner followed the others out of the casino, without anyone realizing how close he really was.

* * * *

Everything from then on was pretty much routine for the group and went smoothly. Before Dan knew it, he was standing with Rich outside the dressing rooms.

"So what goes on here before the concert?" The concert wasn't scheduled to start for another four hours.

"The stage techs will get everything tuned up so we can test the sound. Once that's done, we'll run through a couple of our songs. We usually work on the newest because we could probably do our standards in our sleep. Then we get ready. The guys have a little time to hang since we don't have to wear as much makeup as the girls. Martha said she had some fun ideas for them to wear tonight. I'm a little worried. I know Martha doesn't look like it, but she was pretty wild in her youth. Remember the beach? You'll find she loves to shock everyone with her outrageous outfit ideas." Rich rattled off their routine.

"Sounds like I won't be bored. I guess while the band's warming up, I'll take Jason and make the rounds. I had Marty give the captain the name of

any local people working with our stage techs in each town. We'll have a background check on everyone, not just the regulars. He hasn't found anything that sends up a red flag, so we still have nothing to go on. After today, I'm even more frustrated. This guy is practically pulling these things off right under our noses. He can't be everywhere at once, yet Jenny got a call from Vegas minutes after the accident with Marty in San Diego." Dan usually didn't discuss things like this with anyone but Greg, his captain and friend. But he knew that Rich and Marla were closer than anyone to Jenny, and he instinctively knew that he was safe talking to either one of them. His instincts usually didn't steer him wrong. He also knew that when he finally caught the son of a bitch, it would be someone they all knew.

"We're all frustrated, Dan. We've all been racking our brains to figure out who it could be. Someone knows everything and everywhere we go. Marla is really freaked out about the whole thing. I'm worried about her condition. We're about to be parents—this should be a happy time. Jenny is so excited about the baby also. The two of them should be planning baby showers, not worried about someone out there watching us all," Rich said as he turned with a frown to watch the two in question walk up to join them.

"Why are you frowning? What's wrong?" Marla asked looking at the two men.

"Nothing, we're just discussing our plans for the concert," Rich answered, pulling her into an embrace.

"Okay, you two, enough kissy-kissy," Bonnie stated as she joined them.

"Where's Tessa and the others? We need to start so we can get ready," Jenny asked.

"They're on their way. Larry was out there playing some machine, and the others were watching. Doug was trying to hang on me, so I told him I'd meet him in here. I don't know why he thinks he can just paw me whenever he wants. Just because we fuck, he thinks he owns me." Bonnie was never one to mince words.

"Nice, Bonnie, I thought you loved the guy." Looking at Marla, Rich rolled his eyes, both being used to Bonnie's talk.

"Hey, I don't have to love him. Besides, he gets his jollies off too. We're both adults," Bonnie argued.

"We've been through this before, and we don't have the time now. Besides, here come the others. Let's get going." Rich hustled everyone onto

the stage before an argument broke out.

Dan found Jason at the machine Larry just abandoned and told him he wanted to do a sweep of the dressing rooms while they were unoccupied, looking for anything suspicious. The notes so far had been on the same card stock. Before the group had left on tour, Dan had briefed the four bodyguards and gave examples of the notes. Dan hoped to find a stash of the card stock. Then, he might be able to put a name to Runner.

Dan looked through the women's dressing room thoroughly. There was nothing out of the ordinary. He found Martha getting the makeup and costumes ready. She refused to shed any light on what they might be, and shooed him out as soon as he was satisfied there was nothing to find in the room. Meeting up with Jason, Dan found his search had also been fruitless.

"Well, keep an eye out while they rehearse. I'm going to go find a quiet spot where I can call the captain. After this morning's accident in San Diego, I need to fill him in on what is happening here." Dan started to walk off, then turned back, and added, "Come and get me if you see anything, okay?"

"Sure, but I have a feeling the drama is over for the day," Jason observed.

"I think you're right. I'll be right outside that door." Dan pointed to the exit door leading to the main casino.

* * * *

"Hey, Greg. It's Dan." Dan had a hand over one ear and his cell phone to the other. *So much for a quiet spot.*

"Dan, good to hear from you. We heard about the agent's trouble earlier. Sorry we didn't get the driver, but with no description of the man, there wasn't much to look for once he dumped the car," Greg said.

"I know. We're having the same problem with the phone call that came from the Excalibur Casino." Dan sighed. Then he explained the events that had happened since they had arrived in Las Vegas. Agreeing to call Greg the next day with a progress report, he disconnected. Looking around the noisy casino, he wondered how he was to find a person in the huge crowd. *It's like trying to find a needle in a haystack.* Sighing, he went back through the door to the dressing room. From the sound, or lack of it, he figured that the

rehearsal was over. Scanning the area for the others, he spotted Rich standing to the side of the stage entrance.

"Did the rehearsal go well?" Dan asked Marla, Jenny, and Tessa who had arrived to join Rich at the same time.

"Yes," they chorused.

"That sounded a little off-key. Could you work on that?" Dan joked.

"Very funny." Jenny elbowed him playfully. But the look on Rich's face made her frown and turn in the direction he was looking.

"No way," they chorused again, only this time Dan lent a baritone to the mix.

Walking toward them, Bonnie was modeling the evening's costume for the women. Martha was happily accompanying. The black ensemble consisted of a bustier with a matching, smallest imaginable thong, thigh-high hose, and platform shoes with stiletto heels. Bonnie walked up swinging her backside to full advantage as she turned and walked away from the crowd, showing off two full, perfectly muscled cheeks.

"There is no way I'm going to let my butt jiggle across stage in that," Tessa declared.

"Martha, what are you thinking? You know the age of our audience can be under sixteen. Is that even legal to wear anyway?" Rich asked.

"Sorry, I can't let Jenny wear that," Dan began, only to have Jenny swing around and face him.

"You can't let me wear that? Look, buster, you can't tell me what to wear," Jenny fumed. "There's no way I'll wear that outfit, but never the less it's my decision, not yours."

"Whoa. Sorry, that didn't come out right. I meant with this stalker around, that outfit might escalate things. I wouldn't presume to tell you what to wear. I trust your judgment." Dan had known she didn't want to wear the outfit. He'd heard her right along with the others when Bonnie had come out of the room.

"Oh, sorry. That makes sense. Bonnie, I agree with Rich. Our crowd is too young for us to wear that," Jenny said.

"Oh, don't get your panties in a wad. You were right, Bonnie. They're all prudes. You guys keep forgetting we're in Vegas. The kids see more, or should I say less, out on the boulevard. Come on, let's go get the rest of your costume." Martha steered Bonnie back toward the dressing room.

"You know, guys, we should be used to Martha by now. She does this to us all the time, and we fall for it every single time." Rich sighed as he threw an arm around his wife and nuzzled her ear.

"Don't. That tickles." Marla was wiggling, trying to get free.

"Okay, Rich, you're right. Let's all make a deal. The next time Martha and Bonnie try that on us, let's just say okay and see what happens." Dan watched Jenny regard Marla and Rich who playfully wrestled. He wondered if she knew how easy it was for him to read her thoughts.

"You know what would happen if we did that, don't you?" Tessa tilted her head to the side to her gaze locked with Jenny's.

Marla answered, "We'd be wearing whatever outrageous outfit the two of them had cooked up. Tessa's right, Jenny. Next time we just don't react, and we say, 'Okay, Martha, what are we really wearing?' That will take the fun out of it for them."

"Agreed." Jenny and Tessa said together. Then they all raised their fists and touched knuckles to seal the agreement. Rich looked at Dan and rolled his eyes.

"Hey, what was that outfit Bonnie had on? She looked hot," Doug said. He had Larry and Jimmy in tow as they joined the group. All of them looked back the way Bonnie had gone.

"That was what Martha wanted us to wear," Tessa told them.

"Great, you guys are going to knock their eyeballs out of their heads," Larry announced.

"Ah, no, we're not. We told Martha no, just like we always do when she comes up with something scandalous," Jenny said.

"Why not? It would be great. The fans would love it." Jimmy agreed with Larry.

"Because our fans aren't old enough. We dress provocatively enough without parading around in a thong," Marla told the men.

While the others continued to debate the merits of wearing the outfits, Rich pulled Doug to the side. Dan, not wanting to join in the good-natured debate, joined Rich. He had an idea what the subject was about, and he wanted to lend Rich support if needed.

"Hey, Doug, how are things going with you and Bonnie?" Rich asked.

"Fine. Why?"

"Well, she was bitching about you today. She said you were trying to

'paw' her and she didn't know why you thought you owned her just because the two of you *fuck*. Sorry, buddy, but that doesn't sound like fine to me. Or are you going to tell me that you're okay with being fuck buddies and nothing else?" At Rich's words, Doug started to turn red from the collar up. "Look, before you say anything you'll regret, Doug, let me tell you I think you could get someone better for yourself."

"Okay, I won't say what I want to, because we're friends and I know you mean well. But, I've got things under control. Bonnie and I know what we're doing," Doug said. "I'll admit I don't understand Bonnie half the time. One minute, she's all hot for me. Then the next, it's as if she can't stand the sight of me. But let me handle it my way."

The conversation ended there. No one would know if it was because Bonnie came out of the dressing room—wearing a short leather skirt over the thong—and heard their conversation or if it had run its natural course.

"Butt out, Rich. Doug knows where he stands with me," Bonnie said angrily, then turned to Doug, slid up close, and wrapped one long leg around the back of his thighs. Leaning in, she gave him a kiss that took the unwilling observers' breaths away. Then, without a backward glance, Bonnie pulled Doug along to the stage area.

Rich and Dan watched Bonnie tow Doug along, then looked at each other and shrugged. When they joined the others again, the conversation was still on that night's costume.

"Well, at least the skirt, although short, is an added improvement to our costume for the concert," Tessa observed.

"Yup, you're right. Now I think Martha is over there trying to get our attention. Must be our turn to get ready," Jenny said as she walked toward the dressing room.

Dan watched the three women go, then turned to Rich. "I don't think Doug appreciated your concern. When it comes to love, men don't always think with their right heads, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, you're right. I remember when I first met Marla. I swear I walked around for months with a constant hard-on. I love her and wouldn't have any other woman, but I'm glad those days are over," Rich said. He looked in the direction where the women had disappeared and then turned back to Dan. "I have another friend who I am more concerned about right now. Doug's a big boy, and he can take care of himself. Jenny is a different

kettle of fish. She has too soft of a heart. And even though she thinks she's developed a thick skin over the years, she hasn't. She's still easily hurt."

"I agree. Before I met her, I would have argued with you. I'll admit, I was one hundred percent wrong about her, and that worries me. I'm usually right on the money when I have an instinct. I just hope there's not something I'm missing," Dan said worriedly.

"You are missing something—my point," Rich said.

"What do you mean? Do you know someone who might be this Runner?"

"No. My point is that I don't want you to hurt Jenny. She's vulnerable right now. You're helping find this monster. I can see she has feelings for you. You know that thing, where the patient falls in love with the doctor because he saved her life? Well, I don't want you to take advantage of that, you know, the *hero* syndrome?" Rich explained.

"Well, I can see you have a pretty low opinion of me. First of all, this isn't my first case, and second…" Dan paused. He didn't know how to go on. He had one close friend, his captain, and he wasn't used to sharing intimate details with anyone, even Greg. Yet here he was about to tell a man who he had known only a few days something that he had just admitted to himself. *Oh well, the man is Jenny's friend and deserves to know.*

"Look, this is something I'm still trying to get used to myself. Not that it's any of your business. I'm in love with her. I'm not going to let anything happen to her. If she doesn't fall in love with me, then I guess we'll go our separate ways. I'll let you know this, though. I'm hoping to God she does fall for me, because I don't know if I could take losing another woman I loved." Dan turned a little red at his admission. It just wasn't a guy thing to do, which left him feeling vulnerable.

Dan felt Rich's stare as if it were a physical thing. "Wow, I hadn't expected a confession. In fact, I thought you'd deny your feelings. I'm not sure I know what to say. I love Jenny, and I only want the best for her. You were honest with me, something I think took a lot guts. So I guess I'm going to trust you. So welcome to our little family, such as it is." With those words, Rich stuck out a hand, shook Dan's hand, and then did a bear hug. Afterward, they both looked around to see if anyone had noticed. Then Rich muttered, "Hurt her, and you're dead."

"Understood." Dan grinned as he answered. "Let me know if you see

anyone hanging around who shouldn't be here. During the concert I'm going to wait in the dressing room, to the side of the door. I'm hoping if our friend decides to drop off a note, he'll get far enough into the room before he notices me so that I can slam the door and trap him."

"Good idea. I'll keep an eye out for anything. I'll tell the guys to do the same. I probably won't bother with Doug if they're off doing what I think they are—he'll be in a daze through the concert. Well, I'm off to get my paint put on. I sure won't miss that when we start our school." Rich gave a cheery wave. And then, as if he felt dumb at the girly wave, he stuck his hand in his pocket and hurried off.

* * * *

Two hours later, Dan was bored as he flipped through a fashion magazine waiting for the concert to end. He had hoped that he'd catch a little action. Not that he expected Runner to show up himself, but perhaps he'd at least have a messenger try to get something in here. At least he'd have a lead to go on. But no one came into the dressing room except Martha, and she only came in to clear up the mess she had made getting everyone ready. After she left, things became very quiet, and Dan found himself jumping at everything.

Finally the door flew open, nearly hitting Dan in the face. Bonnie, followed by Tessa, swept into the room, still full of adrenaline from the show.

"Hey, girlfriend, that was great," Tessa said as they gave each other a high five.

"Yeah, I feel lucky after that performance. Want to go throw a little money around?" Bonnie asked as she began to peel off her skintight skirt.

Dan decided he better make his presence known before everyone was embarrassed and said, "Well, ladies, from the sounds of it, tonight was a success?"

Both gasped and turned around; after the first initial surprise, though, Bonnie continued to undress. Tessa, however, was not of a mind to give Dan a show.

"Dan, you scared the hell out of us. Bonnie, stop that. You'll embarrass Dan," Tessa scolded.

"Oh, I'm sure it's nothing he hasn't seen before."

"I think I'll just wait outside and give you two some privacy to change," Dan said as he whirled to open the door, only to have it open from the outside, nearly hitting him for the second time.

"Dan." Jenny squealed and put a hand to her heart.

"Sorry, I seem to have that effect on a lot a people tonight," he said as he gave her a smile in passing and continued out the door she just opened.

* * * *

Jenny turned to see Bonnie still disrobing as if there hadn't been a man in the dressing room, and decided that was why Dan was in such a hurry to clear out. He had told her that he would be waiting in hopes of catching someone trying to leave something for her.

"Bonnie, shame on you. Dan isn't used to your strip dances like the rest of us," Jenny teased. There wasn't a person in the band who hadn't seen all of Bonnie's considerable charms. If it were legal, Bonnie would walk around in the nude.

"If he's going to hang around women's dressing rooms, he better get used to it," Bonnie retorted.

"He was hoping that someone would leave a note and he'd get a clue." Jenny sighed, realizing that nothing had happened, or he would have told her.

"Well, maybe when we get back to the coaches there will be something there," Tessa said.

"I hope not. I'd rather go back and relax. We need to get up early to leave for Phoenix. I'm hoping that we get there early enough to lie out by the pool. I'm glad we timed it so our concerts would be the day after we arrive in each city." Jenny almost had all her makeup off and was ready to call it a day. It had been a long, eventful one. She was glad that Marty had not been hurt. She had been so busy with the preparations and concert she hadn't had any time to think about it.

"Well, I was trying to talk Tessa into checking out the gaming tables when your new boyfriend interrupted us." Bonnie lowered her brows to give Jenny a glare.

"Why don't we take all our gear back, and then try out some of the

machines in Circus Circus?" Tessa gazed around, but didn't look all that interested in anything.

"Because MGM is nicer and has less brats running around. Where we're parked, everyone is a big, happy family, I just don't feel like that tonight." Bonnie's tone clearly stated her dislike of children. "Why don't you guys try out Fremont Street? They have the light show and street bands. I've heard it's great." Jenny only wanted to be alone, maybe try to reach Marty and reassure herself he was fine.

"That sounds like a plan. You want to join us?" Tessa smiled in agreement to the suggestion.

"No. I'm drained. I just want my head to hit the pillow," Jenny said.

"Yeah, you just want to get in that hunk's pants." Bonnie's usual playful tone had turned to a sneer.

"Not all of us think about sex all the time, Bonnie," Tessa chided.

"They don't?" Bonnie had a feigned surprised look on her face.

Jenny let the other two argue, not paying attention as the group gathered and left to go back to their coaches. The limousines were waiting, and the usual fans were there to get autographs. Not to mention the paparazzi who had to take their numerous pictures. It was an hour later by the time the limos rolled out of the parking lot, taking the tired group back to their waiting beds. All thoughts of going to Fremont Street were forgotten.

Chapter Ten

Dan woke to the motion of the coach. Realizing they were on the road had him quickly climbing out of his bed. He had slept surprisingly well. He stretched and looked around. It looked like Jason was the only one up. After quickly making his bed, Dan took a speedy shower, then joined Jason in the front. He looked out the window to see if he could tell where they were.

"How early did you start out?"

"We just left about a half hour ago. Ron's right behind us."

Dan watched as Jason checked in his rearview mirror to make sure that the other coach was indeed behind him. "What's the plan for today?"

"It's about five and half hours from Vegas to Phoenix. That puts us there about one or two in the afternoon, depending on stops." Jason informed him.

"They don't have a concert until tomorrow night?" Dan had been relieved when they arrived back at the coaches and there had been no new deliveries.

"Nope, so this evening is free. Ron said we were stopping at the first rest stop to start off the competition cook-off." Before Dan could ask for details, Rich joined the two, looking as if he had just stepped out of the shower.

"Hey, what's up?" Rich asked as he looked around and found the makings for coffee.

"Jason has just informed me the contest starts today."

"Oh, yeah. Bonnie e-mailed us a schedule. She is our computer whiz, and she set up the rules. Apparently, we are going to have a competition for each coach. Then the winner from each coach will have a cook-off. Jason is cooking breakfast this morning, and you are cooking dinner tonight," Rich informed Dan. Turning as Marla sleepily walked out of their bedroom, he reached over to pull her into an embrace. Watching, Dan was envious of

their close relationship and realized that he wanted that again. Before he could do something about it, though, he would need to find out who was stalking Jenny.

"Good morning, everyone." Marla yawned as she greeted the others.

"Good morning yourself. I didn't know anyone could wake up and look so gorgeous." Dan joked. Marla had hair sticking up all over, and she hadn't done a very good job of removing her makeup, so it was smudged under her eyes.

"Lucky, aren't I?" Rich replied as he looked at his wife and grinned.

"Both of you, knock it off. I know how I look. I'm going to pretend that you meant it and take it as a compliment anyway. So, thank you, Dan. Besides, I'm grumpy without my cup of coffee, and I can't have any until after the baby," Marla said as she reached for the packets of herbal tea.

"What is this I hear about a computer? You guys have a computer that works when you're on the road?" As far as Dan knew, you needed a phone line to get to the Internet. He was as far from a computer geek as one could get.

"Bonnie set our wireless network up. We have wireless cards on our lap tops. It's great. And welcome to the future. We even have satellite so we can watch TV also. That way, we keep in touch with each other and Marty and Paul in California." Rich poured himself and Dan a cup of coffee.

"Thanks." Dan sipped his coffee as he thought about all the possibilities. He would be able to keep in touch with the station and get the latest on the case much faster than he originally thought. "Would anyone mind if I used the computer for a little while every day to keep in touch with the station?"

"We don't mind. We want this case solved as much as you do," Marla said as she sat down next to the two men and sipped her tea.

"We have a lot of fun with the computer, and it comes in handy when we are working on new material on the road," Rich commented.

"How can you use it to work?" Dan wondered how a computer could be of any help.

"It has a video cam, so when we are working on a song, we set it up on the table here, and they do the same, and then we jam, so to speak," Marla explained, but before she could continue, Jenny's door opened, and she walked in.

"Oh, oh. She's got the *shirt* on," Rich groaned.

"What?" Dan wanted to know what that meant. He thought Jenny looked adorable, all sleepy and rumpled in a bright pink T-shirt that said "Princess" and white sweats that were cut off mid-calf with her dainty feet in fuzzy slippers. Her hair was tousled around her face, and her green eyes were a little glazed. He smiled at her and wished with all of his heart that he could pull her into an embrace as Rich had done with Marla. He was surprised at the thoughts he was having about the future with Jenny. If someone had told him even a couple of weeks before he'd be thinking thoughts of marriage and family, he would have probably punched them out.

"It's the dreaded princess shirt. It means that she's been up working and she's going to be grumpy until after her third or fourth cup of tea. We usually stay clear until then," Marla said.

As if to prove Marla wrong, Jenny put a smile on her face with some effort and walked over to Dan and laid the biggest good-morning kiss she could muster on him. Dan didn't question, just put his arms around her and indulged himself in the moment. When the kiss was over, they both stared at each other in surprise, breathless and hungry.

Rich cleared his throat and brought the couple back to reality. With the spell broken, Jenny straightened and went to the cupboard to get some herbal tea before joining the others at the table.

"Well, so what's with the shirt if you're not grumpy? Did you work last night?" Marla asked. But all she received was a glare. Marla must have decided to let it drop when Jenny didn't answer because she didn't ask another question.

For a while, no one talked as the four of them sat in silence while they enjoyed their breakfast beverages and watched the scenery go by.

After her second cup of tea, Jenny seemed to be a little more civil and decided to join them in the conversation about the cook-off. "I read the e-mail, so I know that you cook tonight, Dan. Is it a surprise, or can you tell us what is on the menu?"

"She's alive." Rich joked.

"It's a surprise, since I haven't really decided what I'm going to do." Dan chuckled when he saw Marla elbow Rich in the ribs and then threw in a frown to go with it.

"Well, I'm going to vote for you," Jenny declared.

"Hey, that's not fair. The idea is for the best cook to win, not the

favorite cook," Rich grumbled.

"Yeah, if I win, I want it to be because everyone enjoyed my cooking. So if it sucks, tell me, and vote for someone else," Dan agreed.

"Actually, according to Bonnie, we have grading sheets. There will be a point system, such as presentation, quality, and so forth," Marla said. "Personally, I think you guys are taking this a little far, but I guess it will give us something to do while on the road. It can get pretty tedious."

"Wow, she's really gone all out." Dan wondered if they did things like this on all their tours. Again the thought struck him how much like a vacation this was turning out to be. He would have to keep reminding himself that things weren't what they seemed. Then he decided to ask if he could use the computer for a little while this morning. "I'd like to contact the captain and let him know he can contact me via e-mail. Is satellite pretty secure? I don't want our stalker to be able to hack into my files."

"Bonnie has all kinds of security stuff on there since we can't have our fans and others getting into our financials. I'm not very good with the computer. I can barely turn the damn thing on. Marla has to help me find what I'm looking for. I'd just as soon let others do the computer stuff," Rich said.

"I know what you mean. I'm glad it's secure, though. I'll hurry and check my files before we stop." Dan no sooner said this than Jason was announcing that they would be stopping in about fifteen minutes. Dan figured that would give him enough time, barely.

Dan e-mailed Greg to let him know what had been happening since the call yesterday, which was nothing, and asked if there were any developments on the accident with Marty. He logged on to the station site and read over the case. Everything led to dead ends. By the time he was closing up the laptop, Jason was pulling in to the rest stop for breakfast.

Once stopped, Jason kicked everyone out of *his* kitchen, informing them that a genius at work couldn't have an audience. Among good-natured grumbling, they found some camp chairs and went outside to relax. They were soon joined by the others since their cook felt the same. Ron would be cooking for the other coach.

"I'm starved. I hope they hurry," Larry announced.

Ron must have heard their comments from the open window because he yelled, "You can't rush perfection. If you want fast, go to McDonald's."

"Fine, I'll just starve," Larry said dramatically.

"Oh, shut up. You've been munching since the minute you crawled out of your hole this morning," Bonnie said as she pushed him out of the chair and sat in his place.

"Hey, I was sitting there."

"Yeah, well, I brought it out for me, Larry, not you. So go get your own. This is going to be a long trip. I'd rather still be in bed than listening to all of you cheerful people." Everyone knew Bonnie was not a morning person.

"Now, Bonnie, you know Larry. He probably has no idea where we store the chairs. I'll go get you one, Lar," Doug said.

Dan watched Doug leave to go rummage through the storage and get another chair for Larry. Dan guessed he wanted everyone to see what he saw in Bonnie. Since joining the force he'd become a people watching. He wondered if Bonnie was insecure and covered it up with her brash comments. Maybe Doug thought the same, and that's why he was always trying to placate Bonnie, smooth over her rough edges. Since joining the group, Dan had never heard her talk about her family, which gave him the impression it wasn't a happy one.

"Everyone caters to him, and he takes full advantage of it." Jimmy sided with Bonnie.

"Hey, if Doug wants to get the chair for me, what's wrong with that?" Larry shrugged. "It's not my fault if people like me. I don't know what you mean. I don't take advantage."

Jimmy just sighed, as if knowing it was useless to explain, and decided to change the subject. "Jen, you still working on some new material for our future music festivals? I'm really looking forward to the new, smaller venue scene."

"Yes, in fact, believe it or not, I have two songs done. I even wrote the lyrics," Jenny said proudly. She turned to Dan. "I like to write the music. It's more my expertise. Then someone else usually added the lyrics."

"That's great. When do we get to hear them?" Doug smiled clearly surprised.

"Now, you guys, don't get your expectations too high. They're still in the rough-draft stage, and they need work. I thought once we're back on the road, we can set up the cams and do a little jamming together on them," Jenny explained.

"I'm sure they're great. I can't wait to hear them." Bonnie turned toward the open window. "Hey, Ron, let's get things cooking so we can get out of here. We're goin' to jam."

"Now remember, Bonnie, these are more sedate, folksy-type songs, not our usual fare. I don't know how much jammin' will be done," Jenny warned, clearly worried as she looked around at all the expectant faces.

Before the conversation could continue, the call to breakfast came from both coaches as if both had planned to finish at the same time. Everyone gathered around their tables to enjoy and evaluate. Jason prepared Western-style omelets with salsa. He claimed that he had made the salsa from scratch. Ron made a Mexican breakfast with scrambled eggs, tortillas, and chili verde.

While the two men watched, the group hungrily devoured their creative work. Sighs and groans filled the air when everyone was finished. There was no question that everyone had enjoyed their meal. Then the time came for the ballots. Bonnie passed everyone a copy, and it took another ten minutes for them to be filled out. At the end, both men scored the same amount of points.

"How can there be a tie the first day?" Jason groaned.

"Yeah, how did that happen?" Ron asked.

"That's just how the points added up. Besides, you both have another turn to cook. At the end there will be a winner," Bonnie pointed out.

"Well, it's time to head out." Rich started to steer everyone toward the coaches. After they gathered their chairs and cleaned up the mess, they loaded everything into the coaches.

"I don't know about you guys, but I need a little nap after all that food. Let's get the cams out in about an hour to listen to Jenny's creations," Jimmy said. "Otherwise, I'm going to fall asleep in the middle of the first song."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Dan agreed.

After everyone settled in, the drivers took their seats and continued the long drive to Phoenix. Dan and Rich both decided Jimmy's plan was a good one and took off for a nap. Dan borrowed Jenny's bed since his bed was above the driver seats.

* * * *

"How do you feel?" Jenny asked Marla when the men were gone and the two were alone at the table.

"I'm fine. Why?"

"I just hope this trip isn't too much for you and the baby."

"Rich is worried about the same thing. I'll tell you the same I told him. I'm as healthy as a horse, and I intend to stay that way. Really, no one needs to worry. I feel better than I've ever felt. I feel alive," Marla said. "I don't know how to explain it. But I hope one day you'll be able to experience the same thing."

"I hope so too, but since I've never had the pleasure of the experience, I'll take your word for it. You certainly look fine. You positively glow." Jenny reached over the table to squeeze Marla's hand. She wasn't envious of Marla. She was just very happy for her. Jenny felt that her time would come.

"Are you worried about us hearing your songs?"

"Yes, it's such a different sound. I hope everyone will like them. And one of the songs is very personal. I'm not sure I'm ready for any criticism. You know I'm not really confident when it comes to lyrics."

"I don't think anyone will criticize anything that you do. You have great talent, Jenny. I think now is your time to shine. You've just been waiting for when we could change to simpler, beautiful music." Marla patted Jenny's hand that still held hers. "You were meant for Irish music. I feel it. I can't wait to hear what you have done."

"Thank you. I just hope I don't disappoint you."

"You can't, so don't worry. Why don't we both follow the men's lead and take a little nap?" Marla stood and made her way back to her room, leaving Jenny looking out the window.

After a minute, Jenny decided that Marla was right. She had been waiting to express her feeling for softer music. Her first song was full of rage. It fit the pop beat and went over well with all of the rebellious youth of today. *Well, I'll just have to risk it and let everyone hear*. She then decided that she'd sneak in and curl up next to Dan for a little nap. She knew she shouldn't. He had told her that they had to make sure everyone thought there was nothing between them, but no one would know. She knew that even though they had been seen kissing earlier, Runner couldn't have witnessed it, so they were still safe.

Opening the door silently, Jenny peeked around the door. Dan was lying on his side with plenty of room left for her. Carefully, she eased onto the bed and collapsed. Within minutes, she was out.

Jenny awoke to something wet tickling her ear. When she opened her eyes, she was looking directly into Dan's lazy eyes.

"Hey, Red, want to know what happens when I find a beautiful woman in my arms when I wake up?" Dan rolled with Jenny and had her under him before he had finished his question.

"I think I do." Jenny sighed, reaching up and pulling his head down for a kiss.

"Whoa, you pack a powerful punch, Red." Dan rolled to his side, and she saw his chest rise and fall as he took a few deep breaths. "What's wrong?" Jenny asked in concern, feeling cold without his warmth to cover her.

* * * *

For a minute, he had forgotten where they were. When he had woken, Jenny was sleeping snuggled to him spoon fashion with her nipples boring two holes into his back. He had been hard within a second and responded while his brain was still sluggish from sleep. Now, he would have to take a cold shower or be miserable for the rest of the afternoon. Problem was, how would he explain the shower?

"Sometimes I have to remind myself just how innocent you really are," Dan groaned, but didn't turn to look at her. If he did, he'd lose control again.

"I think I remember you taking care of that." Jenny playfully ran a finger down Dan's cheek, only to have it caught in his strong grip.

Dan took a deep breath, keeping a firm grip on her hand as he looked over at Jenny. "Red, you're playing with fire. I can only take so much. I want you in the worst way, and it's taking every bit of self-control I can muster to hold back. I told you this couldn't happen while we were on the road." Closing his eyes and rolling his head back, he didn't know what to say next. By the look he had seen in her eyes, she honestly didn't know what he meant. "Jenny, if I let myself get wrapped up in you, I could lose the edge I need to catch this bastard. It's not that I don't want to be with you. I can't. But when I wake up with you next to me, I lose sight of that fact. So

you're going to have to help me here."

"I'm sorry. It seemed like a good idea when I curled up next to you, but put that way, I can see your point. I can't think when I'm around you. I guess I like the idea that I have the same effect on you." Jenny smiled. Careful so she didn't come in contact with anything important, she slid off the bed.

Dan sighed with relief. Even that small distance helped him get his equilibrium back. He watched as she went to her closet and pulled out a twelve-string acoustic guitar. He was impressed she could play it. Then gathering up some paper, which he assumed was music, she turned, blew him a kiss, and left the room. Deciding to wait until he had his unruly body under control, he settled back down onto the pillows. His back still burned from where her breasts had rubbed against him.

Dan, feeling safe now that everyone was together, walked into the living area to the sound of Jenny's soft, musical voice singing words that he had never heard before. Jenny had fixed the video cam to point toward the center of the coach where she'd placed a stool to sit on and still be able to hold the guitar.

Marla sat on the couch. Rich had his fiddle instead of his guitar. He'd booted up the computer. Dan could see the others setting up on their end. Rich set the volume and began to tune up the fiddle.

Rich was picking pieces of the rhythm and adding his own chords to the mix. But Dan couldn't stop watching and listening to Jenny. He thought the words might be Gaelic. He wasn't sure, but the way they rolled off her tongue with a slight brogue was very arousing. If she kept this up for long, he might be headed back to the safety and privacy of the bedroom.

"That was wonderful. Was that Gaelic?" Dan applauded as the last of the folksy chorus died away, and he joined Marla at the couch. At Jenny's affirmative nod, he continued, "What does *rìbhinn* mean?"

"It means 'young lady' or 'matron' in Gaelic," Marla answered before Jenny had a chance. "It's a little ditty about a young woman daydreaming about the lad, or *smarach*, down the lane. And how she visits the Blarney Stone to make a wish that he'll notice her. However, a mischievous leprechaun plays a trick on her because he thinks she is after his pot of gold. So he turns her into an ugly old hag, and the only thing that will break the spell is for the *smarach* to kiss her."

"What happens?" Dan asked

"Well, the *rìbhinn* tricked him, of course, and he kissed her thinking he was kissing her sister, under the dark sky. Then there was a blinding light as the spell was broken, and he fell in love with the *rìbhinn*," Marla explained.

"Sounds like a fairy tale. But I like the sound of it. Are you going to sing it in Gaelic and English?" Dan said.

"I think just Gaelic. The melody and the mystery of words will make it more memorable to listen to." Jenny told him. "Well, I'm impressed," Dan stated.

"Yes, I thought it was a great song. It will go over well at the Sam Hinton Folk Heritage Festival next spring. Marty promised he would get us booked," Rich said.

"I'm glad. It was pretty fun writing it, and I think this new venue work will be fun for all of us. Between that and the school, I think it's just the change we need." Jenny seemed to be stalling, and when Dan didn't think she was going to continue, her words came out soft and nervously heart-rending. "Well, it's not getting any easier, so here it goes. Handle me with kid gloves when it's over."

There was silence as everyone waited for Jenny to begin. Closing her eyes Jenny sat very still then she let the music fill her and pour out through her fingertips as they ran across the strings. The music that filled the air was melancholy, heart-wrenching and haunting at the same time. Tears teetered on Jenny's lashes. Then her trembling voice joined as the words began to flow.

Sleeping in the dark, scared of what's under the bed.
I cry out in the night.
Daddy, are you there?
Daddy, do you care?
Daddy, do you ever wonder about me. Do you even know?
I sit in my lonely bed, cold and scared.
Daddy, are you there?
Daddy, do you care?
Sometimes I say I don't care,
but in the dark of night I can't lie.
I care.

Daddy, are you there?
Daddy, do you care?
I have no one else. Mommy doesn't want me.
Someday when I find you, Daddy, I'm hoping you'll want me.
And then I hear them laughing on the other side of the door, and I cry out.
Daddy, are you there?
Daddy, do you care?
Shivering with cold in my lonely room, I hear a noise,
and with fear I cry out. Mommy doesn't care. So I cry out again:
Daddy, are you there?
Daddy, do you care?

Again there was complete silence, only this time not with anticipation, but with emotion. Jenny sat with eyes still closed, tears running down her face, waiting. Dan wondered if she knew she was holding her breath. When the silence was broken, her chest heaved as she sucked in air and gave a half laugh at the same time.

"Whoa, that was intense," Larry announced. Then he bounced up from the chair and went to the fridge to start tossing beers to whoever wanted one. With the solemn mood broken, everyone started talking at once.

"Larry, you have such a way with words, you moron." Doug barely caught the flying can.

"What?" Larry asked in a bewildered voice.

"That was great, Jenny. I knew when you finally let your talent go and began to write songs, you'd be sensational," Tessa said.

"I agree with Tessa, Jen," Bonnie said. She turned and threw a pillow at Larry as if adding her agreement about his insensitivity.

"What?" he said again, dodging the flying pillow.

"Are you going to try that out on the tour?" Marla said, not paying any attention to the crew in the other coach. "There are unlimited possibilities for both songs. I have some great ideas for backup for your song, not that you need it."

"I can see that busy mind of yours working, Marla." Jenny laughed, as if knowing exactly what was on the other woman's mind. "And, yes, I'm going to try it out. Tell me what you guys think of this," she said, addressing

both coaches.

"I thought since we are doing the workshops first…" Jenny stopped, turned to Rich, and asked him, "We are doing the workshops first?" At his nod, she continued with her plan. "Anyway, at the workshops, we could have a contest, and the winners would sing the new Gaelic song. There'll be choreography, music, and lyrics. Each one could do a contest, and then have the winners gather right before the show to put it all together." Jenny waited for the others' input.

"Great. We could have the contest winners sing the Gaelic song two or three songs into the concert. That way, they won't be first off the block, but they won't work themselves up with nervous anticipation waiting for their song at the end," Marla agreed.

"That gives us a couple of days to prepare. We are in Phoenix tonight with the concert tomorrow night. The next day is a travel day, then El Paso the next night. Then, Jason, how long before we get to Lubbock for the benefit?" Rich asked.

"Pretty much the same routine you just described. A day of travel, then the next day you have the workshops and benefit," Jason said over his shoulder from the driver's seat.

"Hey, isn't Lubbock where they have all the stuff about Buddy Holly?" Jimmy piped in from the other coach.

"Yeah, I believe it was his hometown. If we get time, we ought to check out the exhibition at the Buddy Holly Center," Jenny suggested. "I've always loved his music."

"That does sound like a good idea. Maybe we could hit it the day before the workshops, if we're ready. Getting back to the subject, including today, we have five days to put the workshops together," Rich said. "I'll go back to my room and get some information I brought about the facility."

"Where does that leave me?" Jenny had asked Dan to do a workshop on staying out of trouble with the law.

"Not every child, or teenager, I should say, wants to be a musician. So there will be other workshops. Marla does the choreography, of course. Rich does one with guitar arrangements. Bonnie is a whiz on computers, so that will be her workshop. By the way, Bonnie, what is the subject this time?" Jenny turned to address her question to the monitor.

"I've gathered some information on nutrition. Before you ask, I'll

explain. There are a lot of kids out there that have no idea about how to keep healthy. The schools have come a long way toward computer education, so chances are they know their way around Google, chat rooms, and most likely how to find porn. I thought I'd teach them how to find free sites on nutrition. Introducing it as a way to reduce aging and staying young and attractive," Bonnie said. "I remember my total disregard for health and beauty when I was young. Hopefully I can educate them before it's too late."

"I think that is a great idea. I wish someone had taken me by the hand when I was that age. Maybe I wouldn't be constantly trying to lose these twenty pounds," Tessa exclaimed.

"You don't need to lose twenty pounds, Tessa," Jenny said. "Anyway, to finish, Larry and Doug are working together on a martial arts slash self-defense class, leaving Jimmy to give one on drums. Tessa loves to do the workshops for the girls on self-esteem, beauty on a shoestring. Bonnie, maybe you can tie your computer class in with Tessa's self-esteem one. Since I'm going to be writing more lyrics for our new venture, I will be doing the workshop on that. We pretty much have the bases covered except how to keep out of trouble so they don't land back in a correctional facility. So I guess you're here to balance everything out." Jenny smiled at Dan. "We all want to help them make better lives for themselves. I know you feel the same way since you work with kids too. Okay, enough about that, how close are we to Phoenix, Jason?"

"Since you sleepyheads slept most of the way, we only have about an hour before we pull into town. Dan, we're going to be staying within walking distance of a grocery store in case you need anything for dinner. I'm glad it's my turn to sit back and relax while someone else cooks a good meal," Jason said.

"Good, I'll make out a list before we get there so I won't keep you guys waiting for dinner. Whose turn is it to cook on your coach?" Dan addressed the group on the monitor.

"It's mine," Kelly, the new driver, answered.

"Since we should arrive mid-afternoon, that gives us plenty of time to go to the store and get started. I, for one, have something that will need a couple of hours to simmer."

"I do, too, so if you don't mind, I'll tag along to the store with you."

"Hey, why am I the last to cook?" Larry groused.

"Because we are all afraid of what you are going to cook." Bonnie smirked.

"Hey, I can cook."

"What?" Doug and Jimmy asked at the same time.

"Lots of things, cereal, Eggos, and I can make really good cinnamon toast," Larry replied proudly.

"Oh, well, excuse me. I guess that covers your breakfast meal. I don't even want to know what your talents are for dinner." Doug groaned.

"Sorry to bring everyone back to the workshops and benefit, but I have one last question. Okay, maybe two." Marla broke into the good-natured bickering. "Jenny, are you going to try out your song 'Daddy, Do You Care?'"

"Yes, I thought, right before the first break, I'd tell the audience that they're going to be my guinea pigs for our new sound. Although the concert is open to the public, the kids at the center have to *earn* their tickets. I think they'll think themselves extra special because we are giving them the privilege to be the first to hear a new song."

"Okay, sounds good. So what do you say we take some time to work on the two songs and what we want to do?" Marla asked the group. "The best time would be when Kelly and Dan are working their magic on creations for dinner."

"Marla's the one who keeps us grounded and focused, or, as you can see, we'd be playing around all the time and get no practicing or planning done." Jenny smiled at Dan.

"That's true. She's a slave driver, but she's my slave driver." Rich walked over, sat on the arm of the sofa, and slid his arm around his wife. "Sometimes I get out the whips and chains to let her have her way with me."

Marla elbowed him in the ribs and turned red at his joking. "That's not true. I'm the one that gets them out, and you always whine and say, 'Not tonight, I'm tired.'"

"Shush, I don't want them to know all of our secrets." Rich chuckled.

Everyone said good-bye so they could take the computers down and gather material for their work session that afternoon. With everyone busy, Dan decided to do a little research on the Internet about similar cases to the one he was working on and see if there were any other celebrity stalkers

with the same MO. After finding several similar cases, he concluded none of them would lead him anywhere since the culprits were all gone or behind bars. Hoping that Greg had more news for him, he sent off an e-mail, then settled back to begin his grocery list.

Dan was just finishing his list when Jason pulled the coach into the RV Park they would be staying in. Looking out the window, he saw that it was a well-cared-for park, and it looked like it had every convenience. The grocery store Jason spoke of was on the property, which was almost a little town itself. There was a large swimming pool in the center, a playground by the side, and a kiddie pool. The store had several small shops along the side, basically a strip mall. There was a video shop, bookstore, a coffee shop, a fast-food restaurant, and a diner for those who were not in the mood to cook.

Between the two lots the coaches were parked on was a picnic area, complete with an outdoor grill. While the other men were leveling out the coaches and getting everything settled, Larry found a place to play horseshoes. After dinner, there would be yet another contest, this time with horseshoes, men versus women.

"Hold on right there, Larry. Can you count? There are only four women and, let's see, how many men?" Tessa planted her feet firmly and placed her hands on her hips.

"There's only four guys," Larry answered.

"So only the band gets to play?"

"No. Duh, everyone gets to play."

"Larry, then that makes it nine guys. Where did you go to school?" Bonnie corrected Larry's math.

"Sorry, I was counting on them playing, just didn't count them." Larry shrugged, never embarrassed when others caught his mistakes.

"Okay, how about splitting up equally and Marla can referee since she can't play because of her condition?" Rich offered his two cents.

"Whoa. Who said I couldn't play?" Marla snarled at her husband. "I'm not even showing, and you're treating me like I'm an invalid. If I let you have your way, I'd be in bed for the rest of my pregnancy."

"Do you think you should play? Won't it hurt the baby?" Rich looked at her in concern.

"The doctor advised to keep up normal activities, and horseshoes is hardly strenuous."

"But, what happens if someone hits you with a horseshoe?"

"No one will hit me. Most likely everyone will be trying so hard to miss me, they'll miss the pole too, and I'll win." Marla chuckled.

"Okay, you win, so that means we have an extra person, so let's break up into sets of four, and we'll rotate so everyone sits out one game," Bonnie suggested.

With everyone in agreement, the band set up their session at the picnic table while the others went about their own pursuits. Kelly and Dan went to the store, and Ron and Jason, tired after driving all day, went to take much-needed naps.

"So, is it all right if I know what you are cooking?" Dan asked Kelly as the two of them walked to the store for supplies.

"I guess. Apparently only my coach is voting about my cooking, and then whoever wins in our coach will have a cook-off against the winner in your coach."

"That's what I hear. So what are you going to cook?"

"I'm going to do rib eye steaks, marbled so there will be a lot of natural flavor. Over the years, I have perfected a blend of seasonings that complement the steak's flavor. I hope they have everything I need here," Kelly answered, looking around the small store they had just entered.

"I'm worried about the same thing. I'm doing a brisket with my own special barbecue sauce, and I'm going to be looking for a few secret ingredients myself. It's not going to be the same without them," Dan said. Then both men agreed to go in their own directions and meet at the front of the store when done.

Dan wandered over to the baking aisle, where the spices were, deciding to get anything perishable last. He was in luck—the store had everything he needed. He picked out the best white corn he could find, knowing that the whiter the corn, the sweeter. He then decided on a tossed salad to round off the meal. He picked out the freshest tomatoes, red leaf lettuce, mushrooms, and avocados. He figured Kelly would probably have a dessert, so he mentally went over his recipes for dessert and decided on a peach cobbler.

Unfortunately, peaches were out of season, so he settled for canned peaches and picked up some flour and the rest of his ingredients. He wished he had taken inventory of what was already stocked in the coach. This was going to cost him a fortune. He knew they must have some of the stuff he

was buying. *Oh well, it's my own fault*. Checking over his list, he still had to pick up the brisket. Following the store directions to the meat department, he found a nice, but humble, meat department.

Since both men finished at the same time, they ended up walking to the checkout together. Dan had been wanting to ask one of the new drivers about their impression of the interaction of the group. He figured that being new would make Kelly more impartial.

"I know that this is your first time with the band. Have you ever met them before at any of their functions?" Dan asked as Kelly loaded the checkout counter with his food items.

"No, I've only met the drivers before because we're from the agency. Jason and Ron have told stories about past tours. I really didn't believe them until now. I thought they had been briefed to keep any wild parties and stuff like that under wraps. When they told stories of how tame and normal everyone was, I scoffed. Now, after only a couple of days, my whole opinion has changed. They are just regular people, nice and down to earth. Well, with the exception of Bonnie—she's got her boyfriend with her, and she's already come on to me," Kelly said.

"I know what you mean, same thing for me. I couldn't have been more wrong about Jenny. I thought I was going to be babysitting a trollop."

"Does anyone ever use the word 'trollop' anymore?" Kelly asked.

"Sorry, I think that's a word my mom would use," Dan said with a laugh. "Anyway, to continue, I really thought Jenny was making the stalker up. Then I saw the notes, and I met her. Well, you know the rest," Dan said, finishing up with his purchases. "What do you think? I need your perception on things. I've come up with no clues to the stalker. Do you think it could be any of the band?"

"Let me think a minute. Hey, miss? Is it all right if we take one of these shopping carts? We promise to bring it back right after dinner," Kelly asked.

"Sure, just make sure that you don't leave it at the site, or my manager will kill me. We aren't supposed to let people take them," the girl said. "But since I heard you two good-looking guys are cooking dinner for the park's famous guests, I'll let you."

"Thanks." Dan waved as his bags joined Kelly's in the cart.

"You know, at first, I thought it could be Jimmy. Traveling all day in close quarters, you can't help but hear things and observe. I think Jimmy is

in love with Jenny. Although he tries to keep it to himself, the others know. They tease him about it, but he just takes it when they dish it out, and he's so good-natured about it that I can't help but think this is an ongoing thing. So, no, I really don't think it could be any of them. They're too much like siblings. Sounds dumb, I know, but I come from a large family, and their interaction reminds me of me and my sisters and brothers." Kelly finally ran out of air.

The rest of the way was covered in silence as Dan added Kelly's opinion to his arsenal of nonleads. The only leads he was getting so far were who it wasn't and no leads as to who it could be. At this rate, he'd never find the stalker before he made his move on Jenny. Sighing, he decided to put it out of his mind and concentrate on the evening's competition. *Damn it, there's nothing to be done about it tonight.*

Back at the coaches, both men went to their respective vehicles and began preparations. Finding the coal, Dan set out to get the grill going in preparation of the brisket and corn. The evening flew by, and before he knew it, everyone was sitting back and enjoying their peach cobbler with coffee and tea. It was time for the evaluation of the night's entries into the contest. Bonnie passed around the ballots, and everyone busily marked their scores down.

"Okay, tell everyone who won, and let's get going on a horseshoe game. Doug, Jimmy, Jenny, and I will be the first team," Larry announced before Bonnie had finished gathering up the ballots.

"What's the big hurry, Larry? I'm about to pop," Rich groaned.

"Hey, this is one game I can actually beat you guys at."

"You've never played with me," Dan called out from his chair, where he was sure he wouldn't be able to move from for at least an hour. He had tried some of Kelly's rib eye. *Maybe I can win the horseshoe competition, because after tasting that rib eye, I don't think I've got a snowball's chance in hell of coming out on top with my brisket.*

"Oh, I bet I can beat you. My family has tournaments, and I always win," Larry replied, puffing up chest.

"I guess we'll just wait and see then." Dan knew how to play a mean game; time would tell who would be the winner.

"Larry, do I have to be on your team? I'm so stuffed I don't think I can move yet," Jenny said as she tried to get out of her chair, then groaned and

sat back down.

"You guys are such wusses. Bonnie, do you want to be on the first round?" Larry said as he looked hopefully at Bonnie.

"Why don't you want me?" Tessa asked. "I can play horseshoes, and I'm pretty damn good at it too."

"Yeah, right, you're so short your arms couldn't even throw a shoe that would reach the pit, let alone make a ringer," Larry scoffed.

"Put me on your team, and I'll prove you wrong."

"Go ahead. I'm stuffed like everyone else. I'll just sit this one out," Bonnie agreed.

"Fine. Come on, Tessa, let's go. Doug, Jimmy, you guys in?" Larry asked.

"Yeah, we'll be there in a minute," Jimmy answered for both of them.

With the game in full swing, Dan started to clear the dishes. Tom came over to help out, giving Dan the opportunity to get his opinion as he had done with Kelly that afternoon. When they were inside the coach with their armload of dishes, Dan asked him.

"I don't know much about the people in the other coach. Other than meal times, I'm usually here. I'm fairly new to the agency, so I don't know Jason or Ron very well. I've worked a couple of gigs with Kelly, and he seems like a good guy. We all have to pass a pretty thorough background check to be employed with the agency. Not that it alone can take any of us off your list, but I'm not inclined to think it's any of us. On the other hand, I just met the band, but from what I have seen, I don't really think it's any of them either. Rich and Marla are too close to Jenny, and I don't think Rich would be stalking Jenny with Marla around. The others seem like a bunch of good kids having a good time with the talent that God gave them," Tom said.

Disappointed with Tom's answer but not surprised, Dan thanked him for his opinion, finished cleaning up, then went out to join the others. He found Jason standing off to the side and decided it was a good opportunity to get his take on the group.

Without taking his eyes off the game, Jason answered Dan's questions, quietly so that the rest of the group wasn't reminded of why Dan had joined them. His answers were along the same lines as the other two, except he had known the band since they had started doing tours.

Dan pressed him. “You know everyone better than the other drivers; you’ve got to have some insight with what you observe on a tour when everyone is thrown together for hours at a time.”

“Look, I’ve told you what I know or don’t know. If you want to do another background check on me, you can.”

“Look, I’m asking everyone the same thing I’ve just asked you. I’ve got to find this bastard before he hurts someone,” Dan retorted when Jason got a little snippy with his answer.

“No, I’m sorry. I want you to catch this bastard, and if that means questioning everyone and their grandmother, then do it.”

“We’re on the same page then. I’m up next, so I think I’ll wander over to talk to Ron a minute. Then I’ll have everyone covered and can put the questioning to bed.” Dan started to walk away, then turned back. “Please keep your eyes open. We haven’t had another note or incident since last night. It’s been pretty quiet today. Of course, we’ve been on the road, but we aren’t now, and something could happen.”

“I’ve already been thinking the same thing. I’ll let you know if I see anything.”

“Thanks, I’ll just go talk to Ron now.”

“Hey, how’s the game going? You’re up against me, aren’t you?” Dan asked as he joined Ron on the other side of camp area, where Ron stood watching the game, holding a beer.

“Looks like Larry’s claim to horseshoe fame is accurate. He’s going to be hard to beat. I’ve counted ten ringers in a row. I’ve never seen that happen before. Of course, I don’t play a lot of horseshoes either,” Ron answered without taking his eyes off the game.

“Thought I’d ask you a couple of questions,” Dan started, only to be interrupted by Ron.

“Yeah, figured as much, I saw you talking to Jason. I don’t know that I’ll be able to tell you anything different. I’ve been with the kids almost as long as Jason. Fire away. I’ll do my best to help out.” Ron wasn’t that much older than the “kids” he referred to.

Dan asked him the same questions he had asked the others, and, as predicted, Ron’s answers paralleled those of Jason’s. After asking Ron to keep an eye out as he had done with Jason, it was time for their turn at the horseshoes. As it turned out, Larry was true to his word and beat the pants

off everyone. After good-natured grumbling and hollered good nights, the group went off to their coaches and settled down for the night.

There was no appearance of mysterious notes or phone calls that night. Dan made himself comfortable in bed, but his mind wouldn't turn off. It was too full of questions. *What is Runner up to? Damn, what is he waiting for? Is he waiting for the concert to leave another note? God, I'm never going to get any sleep tonight.*

Chapter Eleven

Dan sat looking over his e-mails from Greg. He hadn't had any more luck on clues than Dan. He couldn't remember feeling this frustrated over a case before. Both the concert in Phoenix and in El Paso had gone over without a hitch. There were no notes or phone calls, and no one got hurt as Runner had threatened. *What was his game plan?* Dan kept asking himself. Everything was going smoothly, too smoothly. The group was even having a good time with the food contest. The planning for the workshops was coming along nicely. There was nothing to complain about. Dan was holding his breath for the other shoe to drop, because he knew it would. This had to be exactly what Runner had in mind—have everyone waiting in anticipation, jumping at shadows, until everyone's guard was down. Then he would strike. Running a hand through his hair in frustration, he thought, *But where and when?* It was driving Dan crazy.

Just then a door opened, and a sleepy Jenny walked out yawning. Dan noticed that she didn't have on her princess shirt. Rich had been right. When the princess shirt appeared, it was best to lie low. Smiling in return, he watched her rummage through the cupboard until she found her favored tea before putting the kettle on the burner. Dan stood to walk over to her, then leaned down close to her ear so no one else would hear, and said, "Hey, Red, you're looking delightful in a tousled way this morning. I wouldn't mind having you for breakfast." Dan took the opportunity to nibble at the ear he had just whispered in. Then he straightened a little to smile at her blush.

"Dan, I thought we weren't supposed to say or do things like that," Jenny answered as she looked around Dan to see if Jason or Tom were watching. A delightful red hue traveled over her cheeks to indicate her embarrassment. Dan looked over his shoulder to see Tom in the driver seat, and Jason was half turned in his smiling a tolerant smile in her direction.

Dan reluctantly straightened and resisted the urge to turn to see who was watching. Jenny was right. He shouldn't be enjoying stolen kisses in the small kitchen when others were watching. *Hell, I shouldn't even if someone isn't watching.*

"Jason tells me we'll be in Lubbock by tonight. He said it's about a seven- or eight-hour drive from El Paso depending on the stops. Are you ready for the workshops tomorrow?" Dan grabbed a cup of coffee for himself and for Jason, and walking toward Jason, he handed one to him. Then he settled back in his vacated seat.

"Yes, I'm ready with *my* workshop, anyway. And talking to everyone else, I'd say we're all ready. We're excited for the contest for the kids to perform the leprechaun and the lassie song. I'm a little nervous about my debut of my other song, though." Jenny looked up to see Dan's look. "All right, I'm petrified." Jenny sat across from him, and she leaned over awkwardly to try to see what he had been working on. Before she could, he snapped the computer shut to block the screen.

"It's too early for you to have to look at this stuff." Dan tried to make light of what he was doing. He knew that Jenny was more nervous about the nonappearance of any more notes than the rest of them.

"I know, but have you heard anything? Marty called after the concert to let me know they are both okay and looking forward to visiting us in Memphis."

"I forgot they're going to fly in. Isn't it your birthday when we're there?"

"Yes it's my birthday, and we are going to have Gumbo at B. B. King's. Originally, we had planned to go to Margaritaville in New Orleans. Now that that stop has been cancelled due to the hurricane, I guess us parrot heads are going to have to go without." He knew that Jenny hadn't missed the fact he hadn't answered her question, but she let it drop.

"What in the world is a parrot head?"

"Don't tell me you don't know?" Jenny gave an exaggerated look of shock.

"No, I don't know. What is it?" Dan asked again.

"You do know Jimmy Buffett, right?"

"Isn't that the guy who sings 'Margaritaville'?"

"Yes, and his fans are called parrot heads. If you hang around with me

long enough, you'll be going to a concert. Then you'll be hooked, and you'll be one. Everyone who goes to his concerts dresses up in grass skirts, coconut bras, parrot hats, or shark hats. Actually, it's hard to explain. You are just going to have to experience it. I can't wait to introduce you to a Buffett concert."

"There is no way in hell that you are going to get me to wear a grass skirt or a coconut bra. Or do just the women wear those?" Dan said. *I wouldn't mind seeing Jenny in a coconut bra and grass skirt.*

"We'll initiate you slowly. You can just wear a hat your first concert. But then, I promise you, you'll be looking for outrageous getups to wear." Jenny chuckled.

Marla and Rich entered the room in time to hear Jenny chuckle and wanted to know the joke.

"No joke, I'm just telling Dan I'm going to make a parrot head out of him. But can't you envision him bare-chested in a grass skirt and flip-flops? He says he won't wear a grass skirt."

"That's what I told Marla the first time she took me to a concert at Coors Amphitheatre. And guess what, the next concert I was in a grass skirt, coconut bra, and a shark hat." Rich laughed at the look Dan gave him.

"Don't worry, Dan, no one will make fun of you, because we all dress up." Marla patted Dan's hand as if she were comforting a small child who didn't want to go to the dentist.

"I'm not sure I want to go to a concert where men wear grass skirts." Dan was sure now they were all nuts. "I'm not going to believe any of that stuff until I see it with my own eyes. Okay, change of subject, what is the game plan for Lubbock? Where do we stay? I looked at the itinerary, and the center is about ten miles outside of the city."

"We've never done a concert in Lubbock before, so I'm not sure," Rich answered, then turned toward the front where Jason sat listening. "Do you know where we will be staying tonight?"

"Yes, Marty found a nice RV park in the city. Then tomorrow morning we'll drive out and park at the center. Everyone will need to have the coaches to get ready in," Jason answered.

"Hey, I just thought of something. Some detective I am. I never thought to wonder why Martha didn't travel with the band, but she's always there to do the makeup. She doesn't travel with the vans carrying the equipment and

stage techs, does she?" *Maybe she is Mrs. Santa Claus, and the stage techs are really little elves.* Dan almost laughed out loud at the picture he had painted and then started when he realized Marla was answering his question.

"No, Martha flies to all the destinations, claiming she's too old to *rough it* like we do. She won't be coming to Lubbock, though. It's her daughter's birthday. She'll catch up to us in Dallas," Marla replied.

"That makes sense, not that I suspect Martha. We had her and her family thoroughly checked." Dan opened up the notebook computer to e-mail to Greg to let him know what the plans were for the benefit concert.

* * * *

"So, Rich, it's your turn to cook breakfast. What are we having? I'm starved," Marla asked her husband as she ran a hand over her growling tummy.

"I thought we'd have cornflakes," Rich said straight-faced. "Ha, ha. No, really, what are we having?"

"It's a surprise. You and the baby will just have to wait." Rich stood as he answered, leaned down, and kissed the top of Marla's head. Then he went to gather the ingredients that he would need for his creation.

"Tom, when are we going to be stopping for breakfast? I have a hungry pregnant woman here. It could get ugly if we don't get her fed soon," Rich joked, danced out of the way as his wife sent a playful swing his way.

"Jason, will you look at the map and see if you can see how far Pecos is? I thought we'd stop there," Tom asked.

"Let's see, it's two hundred and seven miles from El Paso to Pecos, and we've been traveling about three hours, so I think about another twenty-seven miles and we should be there. You've been going about sixty miles per hour, haven't you?" Jason asked.

"Yeah, these rigs get too shaky if you go much faster. That okay with you, little mother?" Tom asked Marla.

"I believe this little mother can hold out for another twenty-seven miles."

After arriving in Pecos a short while later, the group was out and stretching as Rich and Larry tried their culinary talents on breakfast. Larry's coach mates were almost visibly trembling in trepidation of what their

breakfast would consist of.

"He hasn't been watching *Fear Factor* lately, has he?" Bonnie asked the group at large.

"Even Larry wouldn't fix something that disgusting," Jenny said in Larry's defense. Although, she was glad she would get to eat Rich's fare.

"We're talking Larry here, Jenny. He doesn't think the same way as a normal human being. He probably loves a good bowl of night crawlers," Bonnie retorted.

At the sound of Marla's gag, all eyes swung in her direction as she hastily got up and ran into the coach. Bonnie looked at Jenny and shrugged. Jenny knew that Bonnie had forgotten about Marla's condition when she painted the ugly picture of their soon-to-be breakfast.

"Do you think Rich could make extra of whatever he's making, just in case ours is inedible?" Tessa wanted to know.

"Hey, I can hear you from in here." Larry shouted.

"Sorry, just joking around out here," Tessa called back, giving Jenny a scared look.

"You guys have no faith. I know you think I'm just a stupid guy and I don't know how to cook, but I'll show you," Larry shouted back.

Jenny followed Marla as she ran in the coach with her hand over her mouth. She caught Rich's raised eyebrow as he watched his wife run past him and straight to the restroom.

"What's up?"

"Speculation on what Larry is preparing the other group. I think poor Marla got a visual." Jenny tried not to smile at Marla's expense.

"I don't think I even want to know."

"Believe me, you don't."

"However, Tessa has requested that you prepare extra."

"No way, we have to be fair." Rich replied.

"Oh, come on, what do you think Larry is fixing over there?"

"I don't know, but no one else has had to try our food, so it's only fair that we have to eat, good or bad, what our contestant prepares," Rich reemphasized.

"Okay, point taken." Jenny was interrupted when a pale Marla came back from the restroom.

"Are you guys discussing what Bonnie and Tessa were talking about?

Because if you are, I'm going to my room," Marla warned.

"Promise, no more talk of…okay, I won't even say it," Jenny teased.

"Good, because I've had enough torture for one day. I can't believe you guys were even discussing it."

"I just know that I'm very glad that Rich is cooking for us, and not Larry."

"You and me both. You ready to tell us what you're cooking? I need to get my mind off the earlier discussion," Marla asked her husband.

"All right. I'm making Belgian waffles with strawberries and whipped cream on top, orange juice, and for the coffee drinkers, I'm going to have fresh-ground French roast," Rich told the two hungry women.

* * * *

The last part was heard by Dan as he entered the coach. "Hey, is it okay if I have an advance on the coffee?" He felt bad for the other coach; the reason he had come inside was to get away from all the speculation of what they were going to be served. It was going to ruin his breakfast if he stayed out there any longer.

After Rich poured Dan a cup, Jason and Tom came in to join the group before their appetites were also lost. Rich got out cups for the others and told them to sit and enjoy their coffee and he would serve breakfast in a few minutes.

"This is great coffee. When did you pick this up?" Dan wanted to know where it had been the whole trip.

"I picked it up yesterday before the concert. I spotted a gourmet coffee shop across from the RV Park, so while everyone was taking a nap, I whipped out to grab some."

"Good call. This is the best cup I've had in a long time."

"From what I hear, police officers aren't real spoiled when it comes to coffee," Rich replied.

"Too true. The coffee at the office is basically tar." Dan laughed and took another sip.

"So you're not a good judge of coffee?"

"*Au contraire*, my dear man, I come from a family of coffee snobs. We had nothing but the finest in our household," Dan answered, forgetting no

one knew his background.

"Dan's father is none other than the San Francisco financial wizard Daniel Thomas, the second," Jenny informed the group at their questioning looks.

"Not something I tell a lot of people. However, you feel like family now, nice to meet all of you. I'm formally known as Daniel Janson Thomas, the third. I took my mother's maiden name and dropped the Thomas, much to my father's dismay. Well, maybe not, he'd be too embarrassed to have a *cop* in the family." Dan didn't feel the usual knots in his stomach that revealing the information brought. *Whoa, I better step back. I'm getting too close to these people.*

The time for breakfast had arrived. Rich made a production of serving everyone in royal fashion, as if they were dining at a premium restaurant. He never sat down through the whole meal and kept everyone's plate filled until they begged him to stop. While they were sipping their juice and Rich was finally eating his food, there was a knock on the door. The first sound had Dan's stomach knotting in anticipation. Waving everyone back, he put his left hand to his back, close to his Glock. Then, with his right hand, he carefully opened the door. Bonnie stood at the door waiting.

"Why the hell didn't you just walk in like you usually do?" Dan relaxed back into the chair he had vacated.

"Because if you're eating, I didn't want to barge in and see what we missed," Bonnie whined.

"What did Chef Larry prepare?" Jenny shoulders shook in a delicate shudder as if she didn't want to know.

"Well, he didn't kill us, but I'm still hungry. Have any food left?" Bonnie started at Rich shoveling the last bite of his waffle into his mouth.

"Nope. Sorry. If you'll remember, you made up the rules. You have to eat your contestant's food, good or bad," Rich said.

"Fine. Here are your ballots. Prepare them and give them back," Bonnie growled as she prepared to leave.

"Hey, wait. You didn't tell us what he prepared. I'm dying of curiosity," Jenny asked again.

"If you must know, we had Basic 4 cereal, toast—oh, excuse me, burnt toast—orange juice, and blueberries to put in our cereal." Bonnie volunteered their humble menu in her most sarcastic voice.

"A nice, balanced meal—you have your dairy, starch, and fruit." Jenny couldn't help but laugh.

"Who said we had milk?" Bonnie said as she slammed the door on her way out.

In stunned silence, the occupants of the coach stared at each other, then burst into laughter. Clearly the others heard, because no sooner had their laughter died, than they could hear a chorus of yells to "shut up."

The rest of the day went smoothly as the two coaches made their way to Lubbock, Texas for the benefit concert. The two computers were hooked up, so they could work on the new songs. Jenny couldn't believe that she could still get emotional over her song after they had practiced it numerous times.

* * * *

Jenny looked at Dan. She paused, and his face became a blur as she began to daydream about the future. She was sitting on a porch with Dan. They must have been in their eighties, but when she looked over at him, he smiled and looked at her in that special way. And her stomach did a flip-flop.

Starting, Jenny realized that Marla was talking to her, and she hadn't heard a word. Dan's face came into focus after her little daydream, and the smile had turned to a knowing one as if he if had read her thoughts.

"Jenny, what planet are you visiting?" Marla snapped her fingers.

"Sorry, woolgathering about my old age."

"What?"

"Nothing. What were you saying?" Jenny asked.

"I said I don't want to add any distraction to your song. I think we should have you sitting on a stool center stage with Rich, Doug, and Larry playing softly in the background. How does that sound? The rest of us can either leave the stage or blend into the background."

"Sounds good. What do you guys think?" Jenny asked, addressing the others.

"Okay by me," Doug said, with the others murmuring assents.

"I think we've gone over it enough. We can run through it during practice tomorrow onstage. Let's call it a night. The first workshop is at eight in the morning, so we need to get out of here early." Rich broke up

their practice and put away the computer.

It had been a long day, and dinner had been relaxing with an agreement that the contest had been put on hold for the evening. Instead, everyone pitched in grilling brats complemented with traditional beer. Jenny prepared her own meal, knowing that the dinner wouldn't be good for her diabetic diet. She didn't mind because she enjoyed the company. Everyone talked and joked for a few hours, and actually, for the last few days, she had almost forgotten about Runner.

Unfortunately, she had a bad feeling that something was going to happen soon because he'd been too quiet for too long.

Chapter Twelve

The center was more of a school for troubled kids than a correctional facility. The kids who were there were the ones who the state considered *savable*. Jenny often wondered what that meant because, to her, no child, unless he or she was found to be a heartless murderer, wasn't savable. Well, she could only do so much, so she would do what she could to help those who were here. The school provided the group with classrooms in which to hold the workshops. Marty had faxed a schedule to the administrators a week ago for the teens to sign up for what interested them.

Dan was surprised that so many had signed up for his workshop, How to Stay on the Right Side of the Law. He had imagined that he would be sitting in a classroom with one kid who had gotten in with the wrong crowd and ended up in the center, more by accident than anything else. It was a pleasant surprise so many wanted to make it out of the conditions they found themselves in.

While the band was getting ready for the workshops, the drivers and Dan had a meeting to plan a security strategy. They had never been to the facility before. It would need to be checked out thoroughly to find if there were ways for Runner to gain access without being spotted.

"I'll go explain to the administrator that we'll need to have a tour or some type of map of the facility. We'll go over it before the workshops start. I'll need all four of you on duty while I'm presenting mine. Tonight I'll be right offstage during the concert. Is that all right with everyone?" Dan mentally went over the day they had planned.

"Yeah, I'm fine with that. Ron and I decided that we would switch off guard duty. He will help patrol the grounds and halls during the workshops, and I'll stay at the coach. Then for the concert, I'll do what you want me to do, and Ron will stay at the coach," Kelly volunteered.

"Tom and I have the same plan," Jason added.

"Great. During the workshops, Jason, you take the halls. Ron, you do the perimeter around the area of the rooms. Marty requested that they would all be together so that our group will be in one wing." Dan waited to see if there were any suggestions or changes before he continued. "Good, sounds like we are in agreement on the first part of the day. For the concert, I want to stay as close to Jenny as possible. So, Kelly, why don't you make the rounds inside the auditorium during the concert, keeping an eye out for anything or anyone suspicious?"

"That's going to be pretty hard. So far the kids I've seen around here this morning would set off an alarm a mile away, if one could be set to sound every time someone suspicious walked by," Kelly retorted.

"Good point. How about looking for someone who doesn't belong? I'll wager that this bastard is older than the kids here. I'll get pictures of the faculty, if possible, so we won't mistake any of them for Runner," Dan stated.

"I'll do my best," Kelly promised.

"Okay then, Tom, I want you to be outside the auditorium, making sure someone doesn't enter in the middle of the concert. Before we start, we'll have a layout so you'll all know where to watch for someone entering. Now I'm going to see about getting that map of the facility. If Jenny and the gang get done before I get back, tell everyone to hang tight. I'd rather start a little late than give Runner an opportunity to catch us with our pants down," Dan instructed before he left.

An elderly lady sat at an ancient desk with an equally ancient computer, typing faster than Dan had ever seen anyone type. He took a minute to watch in amazement before he interrupted her. He was still standing there trying to see her fingers as they passed over the keyboard when she looked up in inquiry.

"Yes?" The woman waited, looking over at Dan.

"Man, that was impressive."

"Pardon me?" the woman asked.

"Your typing. Most of the people in my office poke at the keyboard with one finger. The captain would give his firstborn to have an assistant with your skills. Ever thought of moving to San Diego?" Dan asked, but before the woman could answer, a man behind Dan interrupted them.

"I don't even know you, and you're in here trying to steal my

secretary?" the man asked.

Dan turned to see a large, muscular man who looked like he just stepped out of an NFL locker room, not what you would expect in an academic environment, even one for troubled kids. "Sorry, I was awed by her typing skills, and I guess I forgot myself for a minute." Dan stretched his hand toward the man in hope that he'd still be able to use it after the handshake. "I'm Dan Janson from the San Diego PD. I'm head of security for the band."

"I'm Brandon Watkins, the principal." Brandon led Dan away toward his office. "I hope my secretary doesn't get any ideas about going to sunny California. I'd be lost without her."

Brandon motioned toward a seat. "Have a seat, and tell me what I can do to help. Marty Kelly gave me a call yesterday to discuss some scholarships for the new school in San Diego the group will be establishing. After that, he filled me in on your stalker. Doesn't sound like a fun assignment to me." Brandon poured himself some coffee. He held up a cup to Dan, but Dan declined with a shake of the head.

"That's what I thought when the captain gave it to me, but to tell the truth, half the time, I have to remind myself that I'm not on vacation. I like everyone. They're like one big family, and that includes the drivers. Makes it hard to stay objective. But what I need from you is a map of the layout. I need to decide what entries to the area where the workshops will be held need to be watched," Dan said.

"The area has access only from the halls, no outside doors. The center was built with security in mind, so it should be pretty easy to keep an eye on everything. I've also asked some of the off-duty guards to come in and lend a hand for the day. When you get back to your buses, they should be there."

"Thank you, we need all the help we can get. They will be able to cover the place better since they're familiar with the area."

"I only brought them in after I talked to Marty. The kids in this facility are more just troubled kids who got in with the wrong crowd and want to make changes and make something out of their lives. There is a center closer to Dallas that is the main detention for kids who are on the path to being hardened criminals. The kids have to be on probation and pass some tests to get into this center. You won't have trouble with them. They're very excited about this opportunity," Brandon informed Dan.

"Good, I wondered why I had so many sign up for my workshop. Usually the kids have to be forced to attend something that teaches them to stay on the right side of the law." Dan stood and thanked Brandon for his help and turned to leave.

"Good luck today and with the rest of the tour. I must admit I'm a big fan of Blade also, so I'm hoping to get a signed CD today for my son." Brandon walked Dan out, making sure to steer him clear of his secretary.

When Dan arrived back at the coaches, he found Brandon was true to his word; there were four extra guards talking to the others. Dan was introduced to the newcomers. However, before he could start to add them to the plan of the day, Jenny and the others descended the stairs of the coaches. Dan had to do a double-take. He'd assumed that they would be in their performance garb. He'd never seen them dressed in business attire. They all looked like the young entrepreneurs that they were. Jenny was dressed in a beige pantsuit with a pink, or something like pink, blouse and slip-on sandals that matched. The rest were dressed in similar fashion.

"Hey, you guys clean up pretty good," Dan joked as the group joined the men.

"Shut up, I hate having to dress like this," Larry whined. "Do I have to dress like this at the school?"

"Not all the time, but when the occasion warrants it, you will," Marla answered.

"Great," Larry muttered under his breath as he ran a finger around his collar trying to loosen it. Then he muttered to himself again. "Jeez, Bonnie, I swear you're trying to strangle me, you tied my tie so tight."

"What's up?" Rich asked as he noticed the additional men.

"Brandon, the principal, has asked some of his off-duty security to help for the day. Marty called and filled him in," Dan explained.

"Good. The kids aren't really that troublesome here, though," Rich stated.

"Yeah, kind of like our Larry here," Bonnie added, then smacked Larry when he gave her a hard elbow nudge at her comment.

"Hey, I was never in any center," Larry grumbled.

"You needed to be." Tessa sided with Bonnie in her observation.

"Why? I'm not troubled," Larry said.

"Come on, guys, we've joked enough at Larry's expense."

Dan loved the way Jenny knew how to step in before a full-blown argument could arise, something that happened a lot if not defused in time. The others loved to tease Larry because he was truly bewildered at their comments. And Dan knew Jenny always kept out of the teasing, her soft heart feeling the others were a little harsh on Larry. Dan was surprised to learn how much he understood her.

"So are we ready? The workshops start in about fifteen minutes, and I can see the faces of some very excited kids over there looking out the window waiting for us," Jenny said as she nodded and waved at the kids straining to get a glimpse of the group.

"What color do you call that blouse thing you have on?" Dan needed to know so it wouldn't drive him crazy all day.

"Salmon, and the suit is taupe," Jenny informed him.

"Taupe? What kind of name is that? Why can't it just be beige? That's what it looks like to me."

"Beige is grayish tan, and taupe is brownish gray," Jenny retorted with a playful nose in the air.

"Semantics," Dan muttered, rolling his eyes at Jenny. Turning, he addressed the group. "Time to get going. Everyone knows where they will be for the day, right?"

At everyone's affirmation, Dan led the group to the area where the workshops were to be held. Dan walked into his classroom full of boys and girls, ages ranging from twelve to eighteen.

Deciding to treat them as responsible adults and not children, he greeted the group and began his planned speech. Much to his relief, the group seemed to be really interested and had a lot of questions. Answering questions, joking, and telling funny stories about his years on the force, time passed quickly, and before he knew it, time was up.

Walking into the hall, Dan found that he was the last to release his class. Joining the others, he told them he wanted to talk to the guards to find out if they had seen anything and he'd meet them in the coach for lunch. He found Jason at the end of the hall talking to one of the extra security guards.

"Jason, how'd things go? Anything out of the ordinary?"

"No, everything was quiet. There were few who opted to stay in their rooms and study, but I didn't see anyone on the grounds. I just asked Ted if he saw anything."

Ted answered Dan instead of Jason. “I’m glad to say that I didn’t see anything out of the ordinary.”

“Okay then. Jason, I’ll see you at the coach. I believe it’s your turn to cook?” Dan raised an eyebrow in question.

“Man, thanks for reminding me,” Jason said, then turned to the other man. “Thanks for the help, Ted. I’ve got to go.” Jason’s words were almost lost as he hurried toward the coach.

Dan smiled as he watched, then turned to scan the area to find where the other guards were. After talking to everyone, once again he felt frustration at the lack of anything eventful. He was glad nothing happened, but he still didn’t have any leads. He knew it was only a matter of time before Runner would show up again, and he had a gut feeling it would be today. *We have enough people watching. Someone will have to see something, won’t they?*

Shaking his head in frustration, he made his way back to the coach. As he got closer, he could smell the aroma of something on the outside grill. Smiling at Jason as he flipped a burger, Dan entered the coach, only to stop inside the door.

“How did all of you get in here?” Dan had stopped at the step of the door, not seeing any place he could fit.

“Hi. We’re comparing notes from our workshops. How did yours go?” Marla asked as Dan pushed his way through to find a place to stand by the counter.

“Went very well, the kids were very interested and wanted to find out about the law and what they could do to clean up their records.”

“I think this was one of the most fun workshops I’ve done,” Jenny exclaimed. “The kids were so enthusiastic and willing to participate. A lot of times, they’re just there because they are forced, and it makes all the difference in the world when they want to join in. We have a list of the contest winners who will perform the leprechaun and the lassie song.”

“That’s great.” Dan wished he could give her a hug, she looked so…He didn’t know what she looked like—he just wanted to give her a hug. *No hugs, old boy, they’re going to have to wait until after you catch the bastard.* “How did your contest go, Jenny?” Dan asked.

“It was great. I had a very talented winner also. However, she was so nervous that she couldn’t keep her voice from warbling at first. From personal experience, I think with a little exposure to public singing, she’ll be

a natural."

Bonnie entered the conversation. "I caught the last of Jenny's workshop, and the girl who won her contest was awesome."

"In what way?" Rich asked.

"She had the most incredible voice. It was soft and sweet at one point, then loud and strong at another. Jenny gave her some of our music to sing, and she blew me away. I'm hoping that she signs up to compete for one of the scholarships for our school."

"Did Marty say how many scholarships were going to be awarded at this center?" Tessa asked.

"He told Brandon when he talked to him yesterday that there would be four total, and the kids would need to compete for them," Dan answered.

"Well, I'll eat my hat if this girl doesn't get one," Bonnie half joked.

"Which one?" Marla grinned. "Bonnie, you have more hats than the Mad Hatter in the Disney film."

"One of my smaller ones," Bonnie answered straight-faced.

"How did yours go, Marla?" Jenny turned to ask.

"I had a problem trying to decide who would win. There was more than one talented dancer, both male and female. One girl had been taking lessons since she was a small girl," Marla said, then shook her head. "Then when she got into trouble, her mother stopped the lessons as punishment. I think it devastated her more than getting into trouble did. The kids were so excited to try something new. It was great."

"We had some pretty talented musicians in our group. There was a boy who played the saxophone as if he came out of the womb doing it." Rich added his comments to the discussion. "I've never heard such talent. He put me to shame. Of course, he's going to be playing with us tonight."

"No, I've got all of you topped," Jimmy exclaimed. "I think the kid who won in our group is a better drummer than Keith Moon of The Who."

"Whoa, that's pretty good," Dan said. He remembered the drummer from his teenage years. He had wanted a drum set, but his mother had said no way in hell.

"Hey, you guys, unless you want hamburgers so charred they resemble hockey pucks, you better get your butts out here and eat," Jason said as he stuck his head in the door.

"We're coming. I don't want my meat too well done," Jenny said.

Because of the time, lunch was rushed. They all grabbed their plates and shoveled their food down. Before anyone had time to truly relax, it was time to get ready for the afternoon concert. With Martha gone, the women had to do her own makeup, and Bonnie left grumbling about how she would probably end up looking like a circus clown.

With the group occupied, Dan, the drivers, and the extra guards canvassed the grounds to make sure no one had entered unobserved. They all met back at the coaches to report that nothing seemed to be amiss. Shaking his head in frustration, Dan watched the others leave to go to their designated surveillance assignments, with the exception of Ron and Jason, who would be left at the coaches.

"Am I allowed to whistle?" Dan grinned at the waist-length, blonde Rastafarian dreadlocks Jenny had on her head.

"Do you think it's too much?" Jenny looked down at her miniscule white spaghetti-strapped top cut off at her rib cage.

"I think it's just right. I love the little sliver loop you've got peeking out from your cute little belly button. Your skirt kind of reminds me of my grandmother's floral tablecloth, though," Dan said even as he appreciated the way it hugged her hips, swishing in a graceful swing below her knees as she moved. The skirt touched the top of the calf-high combat boots that adorned her delicate feet.

"So I look all right?" Jenny revised her question.

"Hmm…sexy, Red." Dan laughed as he leaned in to give her a quick peck on the cheek.

"I had to improvise. With Martha gone, I had to come up with something out of my closet," Jenny explained.

"You had that in your closet?"

"Yes, but only for occasions like this. I normally don't wear the kitchen tablecloth."

"That's a relief."

Before Dan could continue, the rest of the group came out of the coaches dressed in various outfits similar to Jenny's, with the exception of Bonnie. When she appeared at the door, Rich took one look at her and protested, "Bonnie, you can't wear that."

"Why not?" Bonnie asked as she looked down at herself. She'd worn a similar outfit at a concert before. She had on the same black bustier that she

had worn in Vegas, but instead of the black leather skirt, she had on bright pink hot pants that left little to the imagination and black thigh-high fishnets. She had on stilettos that made her tower over Jenny, for once, and her hair was the color of her pants.

"Because we are performing for a bunch of kids we're trying to help reform, not turn them toward prostitution." Rich sighed.

"Are you saying I look like a prostitute?" Bonnie fumed.

"Yes," Rich said.

"You bastard. You know we wear stuff like this all the time. But now it's wrong? It's okay to corrupt our paying audience, but heaven forbid I wear something like this in front of these nice little charity cases. They might run out and buy an outfit just like this with their weekly allowance. The next thing you know, they'll be standing on a street corner." Bonnie stopped talking abruptly as if she noticed everyone was staring at her. Swinging around, she slammed the door as she went back inside the coach.

"That was a little blunt, don't you think, Rich?" Jenny asked.

"No, sometimes that girl drives me insane." Rich shook his head as he turned away from Jenny to look toward the center.

"What she said was true, though. We do dress more provocatively at our other concerts." Jenny lifted a hand to stop Rich's comment. "I agree with you, though. We're here to set a good example. Bonnie doesn't understand that we have an image to maintain for our paying customers. Even though the town people that come out will be paying, our first obligation is to the kids here at the center."

"I think the rest of you look fine," Dan said. "To change the subject, I think we have everything under control for security during the concert. All of our bases are covered. If anyone tries to get in to leave anything, we'll see them." Dan didn't want to elaborate and say, *try anything*; Jenny was nervous enough as it was.

"Good, that will be one less thing I have to worry about," Jenny confirmed.

Before anyone could continue, Bonnie stepped back out of the coach. Much to everyone's relief, she had changed. She still wore the bustier, but had added a sheer white blouse over the top. She had left the blouse unbuttoned and tucked into her black, skintight leather pants. On her feet, she wore the same stilettos. The outfit was still provocative, but less

revealing. Everyone decided that it looked fine for the concert.

"As if I need permission from any of you to wear what I want," Bonnie muttered. She swept passed the group to make her way to the auditorium where the concert would be held.

"Again, she has a point," Jenny said.

They all let their gazes follow Bonnie as she marched angrily toward the building door on her impossibly high heels without falling over.

Jenny fell into step with the rest of them as they followed the direction Bonnie had gone. Dan stopped at the door to talk to Kelly and give last-minute instructions. Then he headed toward the backstage area of the auditorium. He planned to glue himself to Jenny, as much as possible, when she wasn't onstage.

"Blast, I forgot something," Jimmy exclaimed as he looked over the drums he had set up earlier.

"You stay. I'll run and get whatever it is. What do you need?" Dan offered.

"No, I'm not sure where I left it. I had a list of things I wanted to try during the new arrangements." Jimmy walked past Dan.

Dan watched him go with a frown. Didn't Jimmy have music, like the rest of the group? And what did he mean by *list*? Making a mental note to think about it later, he went in search of Jenny.

"Jen, I think you should try your headset for the whole show," Doug suggested.

"Yeah, I think you can handle it. Everyone will support you," Bonnie added.

"I don't know. I'll bounce around all night with my hands fisted, looking like I'm about to clobber someone."

Marla lent her support. "You'll be fine. Won't she, Rich?"

"I'll have a mic sitting right offstage in case you need to motion for Dan or a stage tech to hand it to you. How's that? You'll know you can have your safety blanket, so to speak, in a heartbeat if you need it," Rich said.

"I'm not as positive about this new arrangement. My palms are already sweating. Little butterflies are dancing in my belly, and curtain time is close." Her eyes closed, and her whispered words were barely audible. "I'll try. Where's Jimmy?"

No sooner than the words had been said, Jimmy came rushing in the

door with some papers clutched in his hand. Holding the papers up, he called out, "Got what I was looking for. Let's get this show on the road."

They all took that as their cue to get into the group's signature formation. Gathered together, they entered the stage, marching with hands raised, but instead of their usual fists, they all had their fingers raised in peace signs. The applause was thunderous, and Dan, waiting at the side of the stage, wished he had thought to bring earplugs.

The show's going well, Dan thought as he watched from the side. Before long, it was time for the nervous winners of the contests to join the group in the leprechaun and the lassie song. They had the sax player, the girl singer, the drummer, and something new, a girl who did a Celtic dance along with the song. Dan could see why the others had given the winners such high praise at lunch.

Then it was time for Jenny's new song about her lost father. Dragging a stool that had been placed on the side of the stage, Jenny took it to center stage. As instructed, the others faded into the background. Jenny started the soft introductory melody, and while she did, she spoke to the audience and explained that the song was special. She asked them to be tolerant and told them they would be the first audience to hear it. The hall erupted in applause, and Jenny waited for the noise to die down before she began the song. Her soft voice started out a little shaky but became stronger as if she blocked out the people around her. Rich played a mournful background with his fiddle, and the girls added their voices to the chorus.

After the song ended, the silence hit as it had when she first sang it to the group. Jenny looked like she was about to run off the stage mortified that the audience hated it. Then the clapping became thunderous as the kids stood and started to bang the seats of their chairs to the backs. Yelling, stomping feet, and clapping—the sound was deafening. *A good sign. Funny how I've become her biggest fan.*

The concert ended. The group planned two encores. They usually changed clothes during the break, but with no Martha, not to mention dressing rooms, backstage, they stayed in their outfits. With the extra time, they took a minute to refresh and have a cold bottle of water the stage techs provided. The audience was still clapping, although a little less enthusiastically, when the group went back onstage, which brought back the enthusiasm.

Drained as usual, the group started to make their way back to the coaches. They were happy with the success of the day. The principal, Brandon, intercepted them and gave them heartfelt thanks for their time. He was also the first to ask for an autograph. A table appeared as if from thin air so they could continue to sign for the kids.

An hour later they set off once again to the coaches. The plan was to go back to the same park as the previous night, cook dinner, and fall into bed. The next day they would head to Dallas. It was about a five-hour drive from Lubbock, and if they left early, they could get there by early afternoon. They were all disappointed that they hadn't made it to the exhibition at the Buddy Holly Center, but Martha was waiting for them in Dallas. It was the plan to visit the Galleria shopping center to hang out and have dinner. As with most of their stops, the concert would not be until the day after their arrival.

* * * *

"Dan," Jenny screamed. She had gone straight to her room to change, and the others had plopped down on the sofa and chairs to rest.

Dan jumped up to find out what happened. Jenny met him in the hall holding the corner of a piece of notepaper. Knowing what it was, Dan reached into his back pocket to get one of his disposable surgical gloves. Once he had one on, he took the note from her.

"Have you read it?"

"No, I saw it lying there and, with the poemlike writing, knew what it was. I just picked it up and ran out of the room." Jenny hugged both arms around her body and welcomed Marla's support when the woman wrapped her arms around Jenny.

Dan looked over the note and frowned as he scanned the contents. He knew that he was going to have to read it to Jenny. He turned back to Jenny and told her to come up front and he'd read it to everyone at the same time.

"Jason, can you pull over and motion for the others to do the same? I want to read this to everyone at the same time. I want to watch for reactions and then do some questioning about how it got here." Dan was remembering Jimmy's trip back to the coach to get the mysterious notes.

Jason informed him that they were almost ready to turn in to the park. Dan hadn't realized how close they were. He decided to wait until they got

the coaches parked and settled. Then, with everyone gathered, he read the note.

You're always so charitable, Jenny.
I admire that about you. The benefit for the center was
a good idea. Was it yours?
However,
I'm very disappointed to see that you did not
take my warning to heart.
After the mishap with Marty, I thought
you would get rid of the watchdog.
What will it take?
Runner

"No threat, just an implied one," Dan said to the group at large. He waited to see what comments would come.

"It begins so cordial, doesn't sound like a nutcase," Jimmy stated.

Dan gave him a look, then decided to ask a question he knew Jenny wouldn't like. "So what were those mysterious notes you had to have before the concert?" Dan watched for any signs of guilt, but saw none. His gut still told him that Runner was not Jimmy, but he did think that Jimmy knew Runner and the stalker was trying to frame Jimmy.

"Notes about the arrangement for the leprechaun song. I don't write music, that's not my area, so I jot notes down," Jimmy said. Then, as if realizing where Dan's question was leading, he turned beet red. "Hey, you don't think it's me, do you?"

"Who else had to come back to the coach?" Rich answered for Dan. "I have a hard time even thinking it might be you, but what other explanation could there be? Jimmy, you wouldn't cause any alarm with Jason or Ron going back to the coaches."

"I didn't do it, honest, Jenny." Jimmy turned toward Jenny. "I wouldn't do that to you. You believe me, don't you?"

"Yes, I believe you, and so does Dan. Don't you?" Jenny turned to Dan for affirmation.

"I still have a few more questions before I answer that question." Dan never took his eyes from Jimmy. He didn't want to miss anything.

"Jason"—Dan still didn't look away from Jimmy—"did you leave the coach at all?"

"No—" Jason started to answer but was interrupted by Rich.

"Wait, Jimmy is in the other coach. He couldn't have put it in here."

"Well, I couldn't find my notes in the other coach. Then I remembered I had given them to Jenny for her to look over. So I had to come get them here in her room," Jimmy admitted.

"That's right, I forgot I had them. Sorry, Jimmy. If I had given them back to you, you wouldn't be going through this interrogation." Jenny frowned at Dan. "What are you thinking, Dan? Jimmy wouldn't do this to me."

Before Dan could answer, Jason volunteered, "That's right, he did come over here. But I followed him to the bedroom, not that I was suspicious, but because we were talking about the workshop Jimmy gave this morning."

"He couldn't have taken the note out of his pocket and put it down?" Dan asked Jason.

"Not unless he could have done it in the blink of an eye," Jason confirmed.

"Jenny, where did you find the note?" Dan asked when he realized he hadn't asked earlier.

"It was sitting on the little dresser with the lamp on it."

"I didn't even walk by that. Jenny has a bag she keeps concert things in, and it was sitting on the bed. I looked there for the notes first. They were by the side of the bag, as if she had meant to pick them up and forgotten. So I just grabbed them, turned, and left. I practically ran into Jason when I did it, too."

"He's right. He barely took two steps into the room, didn't go anywhere near the table or stand thing," Jason said.

"Okay, did either of you notice it sitting on the table?" Dan knew it was a dumb question the minute he asked it. Of course they hadn't, or they would have said something earlier. The question earned him a glare from all present.

"My bad." Dan sighed. "So neither of you saw anything, which explains why you didn't say anything to me. Jason, are you sure you didn't leave the coach?"

"No—" Jason began, but was interrupted again, only this time by Ron.

"Yes, you did. Remember the kid who was yelling his head off for help? I was watching from the window of the coach," Ron reminded Jason.

"Oh shit, that's right. This kid was yelling bloody murder, which made me think something bad was happening. So I ran to see what happened. I called to Ron to have him watch over things while I was gone." Jason glared at Ron, since obviously he hadn't watched well enough.

"What was wrong with the kid?" Dan asked, and then before Jason could answer, he continued, "How far from the coach did you go?"

"Nothing was wrong with the kid. He was just standing there yelling because his bike was stuck between a tree and a rock," Jason said. "Now that I think about it, it looked as if he had done it on purpose because there is no way he rode the bike between the two to get it stuck. I was so mad I guess I didn't stop to think about it. I just pulled the damn thing out and turned and went back to the coach. It was on the other side of Ron's coach, so the bastard must've walked right between the two coaches and went in."

"Didn't you see anything, Ron?" Dan wondered why he wasn't watching the space between the coaches.

"No, I was too busy watching Jason to see what was going on with the kid," Ron said sheepishly.

"So, Runner just waltzed in and left the note while the two of you fell for the diversion hook, line, and sinker," Dan said with disgust.

"When I came back to the coach, I looked around to make sure everything was okay. Obviously, I missed the note," Jason said with the same disgust Dan had heard in his own voice.

Dan had already put the note in a protective bag. After dinner, he would call the local station and hope the contact Greg had given him would be there. He'd have them check it out for prints and send any results back to Greg in San Diego. *Damn, another clueless day.*

"Well, let's get something to eat. There's nothing more we can do about the note tonight," Dan told everyone.

* * * *

"Jimmy, can I speak to you a moment?" Dan asked.

"Sure," Jimmy said, following Dan to the side of the camping area.

"Remember what I told you before we left San Diego?"

"You mean about a plan to trip up this Runner dude?"

"Yes." Dan looked around to make sure they were alone and no one was eavesdropping. "I'm not going to tell you what I'm going to do. I just want you to go with whatever happens. That way, you'll look as surprised as the rest."

"I can do that. You know I'll help in any way I can," Jimmy said. When Dan nodded and started to turn away, Jimmy's next words stopped him. "I really appreciate the fact you believe it's not me."

"Let's just say I'm not ready to believe it's you. If I find out you've been duping me, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes."

"Do you really think Jimmy had something to do with the note?" Jenny asked Dan later, when they went on a walk. They were leaning on a fence looking over a field of cotton bales.

"I don't know what to think at this point, Red. I know that I've felt from the beginning it's not Jimmy, but I can't afford not to suspect him when the only clues I have point to him. If something else happens, I may have to take him in," Dan advised.

"I wish you wouldn't. I know in my heart that it's not Jimmy," Jenny pleaded with Dan.

"Exactly. You're thinking with your heart. I can't afford to do that, Red. I'd never forgive myself if I let my guard down and you got hurt, or anyone else did." Dan rested his cheek on the top of Jenny's head. "Do you trust me?"

"Yes, I do, Dan. I just have a hard time believing that it could be Jimmy."

"Then let me do my job and trust that everything I do, I do for a reason. Don't forget that." Dan straightened away from her and lifted his hand and put a finger under her chin to lift her face so that he could look into her eyes. "Promise me, that even if you don't agree with what I do, you'll not interfere."

Jenny tilted her head toward him a moment, as if considering his words, "I promise. It may be hard, but I won't interfere."

Without thinking, Dan leaned down and captured her lips with his. After a few moments, he deepened the kiss, until it touched him deep in his soul. The sound of a slamming door in the distance brought him back into reality. Putting his hands on Jenny's shoulders, he gently straightened away from

her and steadied both of them. Grinning, he laughed softly. “Red, you could make a man forget he was in the middle of a friggin’ firing squad with a kiss like that.”

“Thanks, I think?” Jenny grinned back.

An hour later, the group was getting ready to retire for the evening, which left Dan alone to wait for a call back from James, the contact from the station. He had been out on patrol when Dan called. Something must have come up, because they had expected him back long before now. Dan pulled out his cell phone and decided to call, but before he had a chance, a police car pulled up in front of their coach. Putting the phone back in his pocket, Dan walked over to the car, as a tall, sandy-haired man stepped out.

“Hi, you must be Detective Janson? I’m James McMurphy. I believe you left a message for me.”

“Yes, I did.” Dan picked up the plastic bag that held the note and handed it to James. “Here is the note he left in the coach today during the concert.” Then Dan explained the events of the afternoon to the other officer.

“That’s strange. The center is pretty far out of town for a kid to be riding his bike out there. I know that bikes aren’t allowed at the center.” James frowned as he read the note through the plastic.

“I believe it was a setup. Jason, our driver, said that after he thought about it, the kid couldn’t have ridden the bike between the tree and the rock. He must have wedged it in there on purpose and then called for help to distract Jason and the other driver, Ron, while Runner went into the coach and left the note.” Dan still couldn’t believe the two had fallen for such a common setup.

“I thought ya’ll were trained better than that out there in Californy,” James said in an exaggerated Southern drawl.

“I was, but Jason and Ron are not with the force. They’ve been with the group for years as drivers-slash-bodyguards. We checked them out at the first of the investigation. They’ve had some training and background in security, but who knows how extensive.”

“Well, I’m thinking they need a little bit more training. After all, the diversion was a classic textbook example.”

“Yes, well, hindsight and all that. I’m sure they will be more careful in the future.” “I suppose they will. Well, I’ll take this in and have it checked

for fingerprints. Has anyone else touched it?" James held it up.

"Yes, Jenny picked it up, but just by the upper right-hand corner."

"Okay, nice to meet you, I wish you luck. Has to be hard to come up with clues when you're on the road," James told Dan as he climbed back into his police issue.

"Yes, it can be hard. You'll fax the results to Greg, correct?" Dan prompted.

"Yes, oh, before I leave, did you get a description of the kid who yelled for help?" James half stepped back out of the car.

"I left a description with the message. Didn't you get it?" Dan frowned as he asked.

"I haven't been back to the station yet. They just radioed me to come on over here before I went back." James left after promising to check out the description and get back to either Dan or the captain if he came up with anything.

Chapter Thirteen

Dan was enjoying a cup of coffee and chatting with Tom the next morning when Jenny shuffled out of the bedroom, wearing her frog robe and furry slippers. Tom grinned at the sight. Dan turned to see what Tom was looking at. Grinning himself, he stood to meet her at the sink.

"I have hot water all ready for your tea, Red." Dan resisted the urge to gather her in his arms. It helped that, looking so sleepy and young, she reminded him of Katie.

"Thanks." Jenny took the offered tea gratefully and took a seat at the table.

"How was your night?" Dan asked with concern; he could see the shadows under her eyes.

"Long," she answered with a sip of tea.

"I didn't think you slept very much. I could hear you pacing last night. Why didn't you come out? We could have talked and taken our minds off things." Even as he said it, Dan realized it probably was best that she hadn't. Who knew what would have happened.

"I just wanted to be alone. Besides, I didn't want to disturb anyone else with my sleeplessness."

"If I had been asleep, I wouldn't have heard you pacing," Dan pointed out.

"You're right. Well hopefully there won't be a next time, but if there is, I'll come out for company. How's that?" Jenny asked.

"Good. Tom said we should be in Dallas in a couple of hours, looks like everyone slept through breakfast. I saw some strawberries in the fridge. Would like some?" Dan asked, knowing Jenny shouldn't miss meals. During the previous sleepless night, he had taken advantage of the time to do some Google searches about diabetes. If he planned on making a life with Jenny, which he did, he needed to be informed about her illness.

"Do you want to join me? I think I'll have a slice of toast with mine," Jenny offered. Without waiting for an answer, she stood and took the mentioned strawberries from the fridge.

Dan was concerned over of his lack of precautions the night they had been together. *What would happen if she's pregnant?* he had thought. But much to his relief, he found in his search, as long as she kept her blood glucose in the target range and with good medical care, chances of a trouble-free pregnancy and a healthy baby were almost as good as they would be for a woman without diabetes. He didn't think they needed to worry; it had probably been long enough for signs if she were indeed pregnant.

"Hello?" Jenny said for the third time. "You must be on another planet."

"What? Sorry, I was thinking about some research I did last night when I couldn't sleep."

"That's okay. I asked if you wanted one or two pieces of toast."

"I'll have two, and a bowl of strawberries will do nicely to hold me over until lunch."

"What were you researching? Did it have something to do with the case?" Jenny asked as she handed a bowl to Dan then stood patiently by the toaster.

"I thought since I plan on spending time with you after this current situation is over, I'd better learn a little bit about diabetes. I want to be informed so I know what to do to help you maintain your health, you know, stuff like that." Dan was a little embarrassed to admit that he cared enough to research. He still wasn't prepared for his feelings. Once in a while, they would sneak up on him, and he would feel the need for distance. Those times were getting scarce.

"That's sweet of you. I have a lot of information. I could have given you enough reading material to put you to sleep." Jenny grabbed the toast and joined Dan back at the table.

"I probably could have used it last night. I did find out that you seem to be taking good care of yourself. I'm glad of that."

"Thanks, Doc. I've had to deal with my diabetes for years. I'm pretty good at it now. The only trouble I would have is if, for some reason, I couldn't get my insulin. Then I would definitely have a problem."

"Hopefully you'll never have to worry about that," Dan said, adding one more reason to the list to catch the bastard before he got his hands on Jenny.

Dan wondered if Runner knew about Jenny's diabetes.

"Hi, guys, sorry we slept so late," Marla said when she walked out of their room. Rich joined her in the small kitchen area to pour himself some of the coffee Dan and Tom left, letting Marla get herself a cup of tea.

"Those strawberries look good. Did you leave any for the rest of us?" Rich demanded to know.

"Yes, I left them there on the counter for you. I could hear you guys starting to stir in there." Jenny grinned, giving the impression that maybe she had heard something she shouldn't.

"Ha, ha, get that grin off your face. There wasn't anything to hear except for maybe my bones creaking," Rich complained.

"Oh yeah, you're such an old man." Dan laughed. Then he frowned. *I've been pretty creaky myself lately.*

"I'm tired. Honey, will you get me some strawberries and toast?" Marla begged as she sat next to Jenny.

"Don't think I can't see through you, little missy. You're enjoying bossing me around way too much," Rich replied while he started doing exactly what she'd asked him to do.

"Isn't love grand?" Jenny asked Dan with a wink. Hopefully the two of them would someday have what Marla and Rich had.

"Oh, yes. Are you going to order me around like that when you're pregnant?" Dan said, then stopped with a look of horror on his face when he realized what he had asked. Talk about putting the cart before the horse. They weren't even officially dating, and he was asking things about when she would be having his baby.

Looks passed around the table, and Jenny blushed at his words. As if silently agreeing to let his words pass, no one commented.

"All righty then, here's your breakfast, madam, minus the silver platter that you so richly deserve." Rich handed a plate to Marla. He joined her at the table to enjoy the rest of his coffee and toast.

For a few minutes, they all ate in silence, lost in their own thoughts. A cell phone interrupted the peace of the coach. They all looked at their phones to see whose phone was ringing. Finally, Dan determined it was his.

"Dan here." He sat listening intently to the person on the other end. Finally, he thanked the person and then hung up. He went back to his eating as if he hadn't been interrupted.

"So? What was that all about?" Rich demanded.

"I really didn't want to say in front of the women," Dan replied, then immediately regretted his words at the glare both women in question gave him.

"Don't you dare leave me out of anything, good or bad. I deserve to know what's going on. Remember, I promised to trust you—how can I do that if you don't tell me everything?" Jenny asked.

"She's right. She deserves to know more than any of us, but we're all involved in this, and just because I'm pregnant, doesn't mean I need to be mollycoddled," Marla retorted in a huff.

"Mollycoddled? Is that a word?" Dan chuckled.

"Yes, it's a word, and you can look it up in the *Webster's Dictionary* later. So don't try and distract us from the subject." Marla had a look on her face that said she was about to conk Dan on the head if he didn't tell them what he was holding back.

Taking a deep breath, Dan tried to convey to Rich with a look that he might want to be prepared to comfort his wife. Deciding that he couldn't stall any longer, he got down to the business of explaining what the call had been about.

"That was the Lubbock Police Department. They found a boy that fit the description we called in to them." Dan paused, then continued. "He's in the hospital."

"What," Jason exclaimed from the driver's seat.

"Apparently, someone jumped him and roughed him pretty good. They found him about half a mile from the center. If some joggers hadn't had their dog with them, he probably would have died out there."

"Did he tell them what happened?" Jason asked from his position in the front. "He was fine when he left me, though maybe his ears were ringing after the tongue-lashing I gave him for screaming bloody murder about a stupid bike."

"No, he hasn't regained consciousness. The couple found him in a ditch about six feet away from the road. The dog was exploring during their run and found the boy. They don't know if he'll make it. There was no sign of the bike. The police don't know if it was stolen or the boy was taken from his bike, then was dropped and left for dead. The police are going to search for the bike. They said they'd keep me abreast of any changes in his

condition." Dan had a bad feeling that it wasn't a coincidence the boy had been hurt the same day he had cried wolf to throw up a distraction for Runner. He must be able to describe the son of a bitch.

"That's terrible. The poor family," Jenny said. "Dan, do you think Runner had anything to do with this?"

"I'd like to say no, but I'm sorry, it's just too big of a coincidence." Dan wished he could say otherwise, but what good would it do?

"Let's all hope that the boy recovers, for his family's sake and to identify the madman who's loose," Marla said.

"When we get into Dallas, I'll go over and inform the others," Rich offered.

"No, I'll do it. I want to watch for reactions." Dan continued before anyone could interrupt. "I know it's probably pointless because no one in the group could have done something that terrible, but it's always possible someone was paid off to rough up the boy."

"I hadn't thought of that. You're right. But I'll come with you. You can't see everyone's reaction. It will better with both of us," Rich stated.

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

Deciding it was time to change the subject, Dan knew what the plan would be for Dallas. They were to arrive in the afternoon and go shopping. *For God's sake, these people shop more than my mother does.*

"So it's the Galleria this afternoon?" Dan asked the group.

"Yes, I need to pick up a dress for Jenny's party at B. B. King's in Memphis," Marla informed him.

"Oh, that's right, it's Jenny's birthday when we get there. Why don't you buy a dress in Memphis? There're the shops at Peabody Place," Rich asked his wife.

"Because the party is the first night we're there, and I don't want to get settled into the B and B and then have to go shopping and then still have to get ready."

"You guys are making way too much of my birthday. I just want to go to B. B. King's to have gumbo. Let's just go and have dinner and not make a big deal out of my birthday. Marty and Paul will be there. We'll just have a great time together, a normal evening without thoughts of a weird stalker watching all of our moves."

"Let us have a party. Otherwise, I won't have an excuse to buy a dress,"

Marla begged.

"You've never needed an excuse before. Why do you need one now?" Rich asked.

"Ha, ha, Rich. Jenny, you remember that beige maternity dress we saw at Horton's Plaza?" At Jenny's nod, Marla continued. "Well I'm hoping they have one like it at the mall this afternoon. It's a fun, casual dress, and it would be great for your birthday party."

"You're right. But do you need to have a maternity dress already? You're not even showing yet." Jenny tried to imagine Marla with a cute little belly and couldn't. She'd just have to wait to see it when it happened.

"I'm just starting to get a little uncomfortable in my clothes. I don't want to buy a new dress I'll be too big for in a couple of months. Besides, the dress is gathered just under the bustline and could be worn even if I wasn't pregnant."

"Then I think you ought to buy that dress whether there's a party or not, don't you, Rich?" Jenny seemed to dare.

"Oh, by all means, buy the dress. I'm sure we can find room in the closet somewhere." Rich response came out in a humorous tone instead of sarcastic as the words indicated.

"You know, I really don't have anything to buy at the mall. After the night I had last night, I think I'll just stay here and take a nap. I know you guys are going to be gone for dinner, but I'm sure I'll be able to find something here for me to eat." Jenny announced.

"I'll stay here also then. Jason, you and Tom can take some time and go with the group and enjoy yourselves." Dan informed them.

"Thanks, I have a few things I need to pick up," Tom said.

"So do I," Jason put in.

"Well then it's settled." Dan smiled at everyone.

"How much longer, Dad?" Marla joked.

"About an hour and a half, honey," Jason winked in the rearview mirror.

"Good. Gives me time to shower and get ready." Marla stood, bent, kissed Rich on the head, and then made her way back to her bedroom.

"Are you sure you want to stay with me?" Jenny looked at him shyly from under her lashes, causing desire to rip through him.

"Yes, you can't be here alone. Jason and Tom are stuck here all the time. This will give them some time to get anything they need." Dan wanted

to spend some time alone with Jenny to get her take on what had been happening. Or so he tried to tell himself.

* * * *

A couple of hours later, the group was all settled in, getting ready for the trip to the mall. Jenny was sitting at the table with her notes for a new song when the door opened and Tessa came in.

"What's this I hear that you're not going with us?"

"I didn't sleep well last night, so I think I'm just going to veg and maybe take a nap."

"Please come with us. We'll have a good time, and it will take your mind off this Runner person," Tessa pleaded.

"No, that will make me think more about him. I'll be looking over my shoulder all day, wondering where he is."

"I hadn't thought of that. Do you want me to stay? We could work on some songs or play checkers or something."

"Dan has volunteered to baby-sit me so Jason and Tom can join you guys," Jenny let her know.

"Well, he is cuter than I am, in a manly kind of way."

"He's bigger than you are, that's for sure," Jenny joked.

"Yeah, I guess I wouldn't be much help if the bastard barged in." Tessa looked down at her small frame and frowned.

"I was just joking, Tessa. You've taken several self-defense courses. You could probably take better care of yourself than I could."

"I hope I could. I've never had a chance to try anything out."

"I hope you never do," Jenny said.

"Well, since I can't talk you into joining us, I'm going to see if they're ready to leave," she said as she turned to leave.

"Hey, don't leave us. We're going," Marla said as she rushed out of the bedroom, pulling a reluctant Rich behind her.

"I don't even know if the others are ready. Don't worry, we won't leave you. I'll knock on your door when we're ready." Tessa finally made it out of the door.

"How are you guys going?" Jenny asked.

"We're driving the other coach. That way Jason, Tom, Kelly, and Ron

can watch it in shifts. They all had things they wanted to pick up. This way, everyone gets a chance, and you and Dan will be truly alone." Marla gave Jenny a knowing smile.

"Yes." Jenny left it at that. She turned toward the window to look out at the other men. They were having a powwow of some sort. Dan looked cute in his cut-off jeans, flip-flops, and ruffled hair. His T-shirt was his usual black, but this one had an SDPD logo on the breast pocket. As if sensing he was being watched, Dan picked that moment to look up. He gave her a small smile, and the rest of the universe faded away, leaving only the two of them. Jenny was brought back to Earth at the sound of Rich loudly clearing his throat.

"Earth to Jenny." Rich chuckled.

"Hmm?" Jenny said without turning from the window.

"I guess you won't miss us while we're gone. We're leaving now, so see you later. Is there anything you need us to pick up?" Rich asked.

When the only thing Jenny did was give a vague wave in their direction. A few minutes after everyone had gone, she heard someone enter the coach.

"Hey, Red, what do you want to do?"

Turning to look at Dan, she smiled and asked, "Are you sure you want to know?"

"Now, Red, you know we have to be good," Dan reminded her.

"They just left, and they'll be gone for hours," Jenny said as she stood and walked over to where Dan still stood at the door. Reaching past him, she firmly shut the door behind him and locked it. Then slowly, she placed her hands on his shoulders and ran them down his arms, which caused goose bumps to rise on his skin.

With Dan in his flip-flops, there wasn't much difference in height, so Jenny leaned in and captured his lips in a sweet, slow kiss. She drew back only to rain kisses along his cheek to his earlobe, where she gently latched on with her teeth and gave a little tug. Then trailing more kisses down his neck, she heard his gasp.

Jenny felt Dan try to take control of the situation. He placed his hands on her shoulders and gently pushed her away. He frowned in bewilderment, and Jenny held back a smile as she reached for his hand still on her shoulder, and firmly grasped it in hers. She led the way to her bedroom. Once inside, again she reached past him and shut the door, only this time not

locking it.

"Red, we can't do this." Dan tried to be firm.

Jenny didn't answer. She let him stand by the end of the bed never taking her eyes from him. She had on a sundress with little straps, and the material flowed down her body giving hints of her curves. Using one hand, she reached up to her shoulder, slowly lowered the strap, and slid it sensuously down her arm. Once that was done, she repeated the action with the other strap, then let the dress slide down, and pool around her ankles. Lifting one foot at a time, she stepped over the dress. Finally, she stood in front of Dan and watched his expression as he realized she'd had nothing on under the dress.

His throat worked as he swallowed. She hoped that he didn't have the strength to turn down her offering, she held her breath waiting for him to make the next move.

Finally he took a step forward, and ran a finger down her body from her shoulder, down the side of her breast, and over her hip to her hand, ripples of desire rippled over her. Taking her hand, he pulled her toward him. Her last thought before his mouth captured hers was, *I'm not going to regret this time we've been given.*

When the two were breathless, Dan placed one arm around her shoulders and the other under her knees. He lifted her and placed her on the bed. Then he stepped back and began to undress, slowly and meticulously. His eyes never left hers. When he was naked, his desire in full evidence, he bent a knee to the mattress and came down beside her. Starting at the top of her head, he kissed her temples, gently letting his tongue peek out as he did so, sending ripples of pleasure down her spine. Then he kissed each eyelid in turn, raining kisses from there to her ears. Doing what she had done earlier, he gently tugged on her ear with his teeth. From there, he moved on to her neck and shoulders. He continued in the same fashion down her body, until Jenny was quivering with sensation.

Jenny didn't think she could take it anymore. She thought she had learned everything there was to lovemaking the first night they had made love. Now she was finding out she had only experienced the tip of the iceberg. Just when she thought she was going to die from the feelings she was experiencing, Dan slipped inside of her, and she exploded into a thousand pieces, with Dan following right behind her.

A little later, Jenny felt the bed shift. She had her eyes closed satisfaction tingled throughout her. Then she felt him nibble at the side of her mouth. Jenny, eyes still closed, placed a hand behind his head to anchor him there, and she deepened the kiss, not letting him go until she had maneuvered him onto his back.

She pulled back and, looking down on him, gave him a self-satisfied, catlike look as she leaned down to touch the tip of her tongue to the corner of his eye. When he closed his eyes, she kissed each eyelid, then nibbled down his slightly stubbly jaw. Wanting him to feel what he had done to her, she continued down his torso and licked and gently nipped his flat nipples. She placed her tongue at the top of his rib cage and gently ran it down to his waist, then nibbled her way to his belly button. She smiled a little to herself as she heard his intake of breath when she dipped her tongue in.

She rained more kisses down the hairline from his belly, a little to the side, missing his desire and kissing him on the inside of his thigh. Then she placed her hand around him and kissed him in a way that made her blush.

Dan reached down and clasped her shoulders. Pulling her up, he captured her mouth with his, and while he kissed her, he placed his hands around her waist. He lifted her and placed her on top of him so that she could take him inside her.

Jenny sat looking down at Dan in wonder at the new sensations the position created. Tentatively she began to move, slowly at first. As she became confident in her role of power, she picked up the speed. The last thing she remembered before she collapsed on Dan in the aftermath of ecstasy was the thought that she loved this man more than she ever thought to love anyone.

Dan’s lips had barely brushed her forehead when she heard the key in the front door, then the door opened and slammed. She looked at Dan in horror, as he jumped from the bed, barely having time to pull up his pants before the bedroom door flew open. Bonnie came to an abrupt halt as she took in the scene. Who was the most shocked, Bonnie or the two who had been caught with their pants down, was unclear.

Recovering first, Bonnie strolled farther into the room. Looking first at Jenny, who was huddled under the sheet with a bright red face, she then turned to Dan, standing to the side of the bed, his pants barely on with the zipper still undone. Jenny knew it gave Bonnie a glimpse of hair in the

opening of his jeans. A wave a jealousy ripped through her.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here, children? Mommy's gone for a few hours and what happens? Naughty kids." Bonnie laughed as she sauntered to Dan. She started to run a finger down his chest, but her hand was caught in Dan's firm grip. When Dan scowled, she grinned, he let out a low growl.

"Jenny, you do have good taste. Want to share him sometime?" Before Jenny could answer Bonnie's revolting question, a squeal was heard a second before a little whirlwind came bouncing onto the bed.

"Jenny. You're a woman," Tessa cried as she threw her arms around her friend. Jenny almost lost her death grip on the sheet from her friend's enthusiasm.

* * * *

Dan rolled his eyes as Marla and Rich joined the group. *Good God, I feel like a five-year-old caught with my hand in the cookie jar.* Marla joined Tessa on the bed, giving Jenny hugs. Rich turned to glare at Dan. At the same time, Dan realized he was still holding Bonnie's wrist and let it go as if he'd been holding a hot potato.

Rich moved between Bonnie and Dan and leaned in so that his words could only be heard by Dan. "Hurt her, and you're dead. That's a promise, not a threat." Then Rich straightened away and turned to his wife, but before he could utter any words, there was a gasp at the door. All eyes swung in that direction. Jimmy stood taking in the scene, and without a word, he turned and left. A moment later, the sound of the front door slamming reverberated through the coach.

"I'll go talk to him," Bonnie said.

"No, I'll go." Dan started toward the door.

"Bonnie, you go. Dan can't leave in his current state. Runner may see him," Rich said. "Damn it, Dan, shouldn't you exercise a little more control until after all of this is over?"

"You're right," Dan admitted. "This is the last thing Runner should find out."

"I don't know what to say," Jenny offered. "I'm not sorry. And Dan is not to blame for this. I didn't expect all of you to come bursting into my

room. And I really didn't think Jimmy had that strong of feelings left for me." Dan wished the others would take Jenny's hint and leave them some privacy.

"Ah…do you guys mind?" Dan prompted. After the others left, Dan, thinking of Jimmy, shook his head. He was making it very hard not to suspect him for the notes.

* * * *

Bonnie finally caught up with Jimmy. His long strides had taken him a good length away from where the coaches were parked. He was headed in the direction of the RV park store. *Maybe he just needs a beer.*

"Hey, wait up," Bonnie called.

"No. Go back. I'd rather be alone at the moment," Jimmy answered without breaking stride.

"Come on, Jimmy, you know you can talk to me about anything."

"I know, but I'd rather be alone, Bonnie."

"It's not a good time to be alone, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't. Why don't you tell me what you mean?" Jimmy finally stopped and turned to wait for Bonnie.

"I mean, if something happened right now, you'd pretty much look like the one to blame, my friend," Bonnie advised.

"Shit, don't you think I know that? Whoever this bastard is has tried to make it look like it was me from day one," Jimmy said angrily, turning to continue on his way.

Bonnie reached a hand out and grasped Jimmy's shoulder to stop him, then turned him around. "So don't you think it's a little dumb to help the guy out by doing things that make you look guilty?"

"Yeah, I know. I thought I had come to terms with Jenny finding love with the good detective. It's hardly something that's been kept hidden. I know they think they've been discreet, but hell, the sparks around them could start a forest fire in the desert." He stopped to take a breath and looked off into the distance as if to marshal his thoughts.

"It's been so long since that one date, and it was in high school. Jesus. I can't believe I still feel the same way after, what, ten years? Most times, I just think of Jenny...as Jenny. You know what I mean?" Jimmy scowled

then at Bonnie's understanding look, he continued. "But when I walked into the room just now, it was like I was sucker punched right in the gut. I couldn't breathe. I had to get out of there before I did something stupid."

"Wow, I thought you had gotten over Jenny years ago. I knew you still carried a little crush, but nothing like this. Sorry, buddy, what can I do?"

"Nothing, just something I need to work through myself. I think a lot of it has to do with the fact I haven't found anyone else." Jimmy looked longingly toward the store. "I'm just going to go get a beer, sit in the shade over there, and nurse my bruised ego. Why don't you go report back to the troops that I'm fine?"

"You sure?" Bonnie asked. "I wouldn't mind having a beer with you. Come on, twist my arm."

"No, really, as much as I like your company, Bon, I really need to sort things out on my own. I think this is what I needed. Secretly I've been kidding myself, thinking that Jenny would come to her senses and realize she's been in love with me all these years. Now I know that's not going to happen. I can get on with my life," Jimmy explained.

"Okay, I can understand. I'll go let them know." Bonnie waved as she turned. She'd had a few unrequited loves herself in her lifetime.

* * * *

What is she doing? She's my soul mate. Hasn't she understood anything I've tried to convey in my notes? Frustrated, Runner left the scene of passion to tend a broken heart and plan the next step. Runner needed to sort out if things had changed too much to keep to the original plan, or was it now to be revenge?

* * * *

With no need to continue the pretense in front of friends any longer, Dan held Jenny his lap to help make room for the others. Dan smiled at Bonnie when she entered the coach. They had sheets of music across the table and were studying the next night's song lineup.

"I'm to report that Jimmy is alive and well and totally embarrassed by the little scene he caused. Well, the last part I just added," Bonnie told the

group. She copied Jenny and sat on Doug's lap since there didn't seem to be another seat.

"Good, I'm glad he's okay," Jenny said.

Dan gave a little shake of his head. "He told me he still loved Jenny but had come to terms that his relationship with her would be nothing more than friendship. I'd say that was a pretty strong reaction for friendship." He'd have to adjust his thinking. Maybe Jimmy was worth taking a better look at. He'd call the captain when he had a private moment and have him dig a little deeper into James Clark's—aka, Jimmy's—background.

"You can't believe it could be Jimmy?" Marla exclaimed.

"Let's change the subject, dear. Dan knows what he's doing. That's why he's here," Rich said.

Although Marla glared at her husband, she didn't say anything more on the subject. After that, she told Bonnie where they were in the lineup for the next night. The rest of the evening was uneventful, except for an awkward moment when Jimmy joined the group.

"Jenny, Dan, I owe you a big apology for acting the way I did. I'm sorry. However, I believe all of us owe you both an apology for just breaking into your room like that," Jimmy said with such sincerity that Dan couldn't help but think he meant what he said.

"Hey, who knew that Jenny would be so preoccupied? Anyone else in the group, I'd never have entertained the thought of walking in unannounced," Bonnie said, unrepentant. "Everyone takes sex too seriously. You guys need to lighten up."

Embarrassed that the subject had turned back to the events of the afternoon, Jenny changed the subject. "I think it's time we turn in. We have a show tomorrow. Are we just hanging around here until it's time to go the Superpages.com Center?"

"Yes, we'll have lunch. I believe it's Jimmy's turn in our trailer. Then we need to get there around four for rehearsal," Tessa informed everyone.

"Tom, I think it's your turn for lunch in here," Rich said with a smile as if glad it wasn't his turn. "Are we going to do your new song, 'Daddy, Do You Care?'"

"I don't know. I thought I'd see how it went in rehearsal tomorrow and let everyone help me make the decision." Jenny stood to leave. "I'll see everyone in the morning. Good night."

After everyone had gone their separate ways, Dan followed Jenny. Following a brief knock on her door, he pushed it open enough to poke his head to peek.

"Decent?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Good, I want to talk to you, and if you weren't dressed, I'd get too distracted. How are you after that little fiasco this afternoon?"

"I'm embarrassed. But I'll live. It was like being sixteen and being caught by your parents."

"Exactly my thoughts." Dan wanted her to confirm his thoughts; after the apology, Dan was back to the opinion Runner was trying to frame Jimmy. "What do you think about Jimmy's reaction?"

"I was surprised. For a long time after our date, he tried to convince me I was wrong and really liked him. Then Marty talked to him, and after that he'd be embarrassed when we were working, but as time went by, he seemed to come to terms. I hadn't even thought about it in years until you came on the scene and started asking questions about the notes. I don't think he would stalk me, though, and I know it looks bad."

"I think he played right into Runner's hands with his reaction. Although, it couldn't have been planned. You're right, though. I don't think he's doing it either. Remember this conversation and trust me if I do something involving Jimmy, all right?"

"You won't explain, will you? I'll trust you. Promise me you won't hurt any of my family."

"If they're not involved, there's no reason they would be hurt." Dan shifted and waited for her to answer.

"I'll accept that." Jenny's head to the side in inquiry, "Are you going to stay with me tonight?"

"I see no reason to sleep out on that uncomfortable bed any longer. It's hard to keep up the pretense when everyone saw the evidence with their own eyes." Dan led Jenny to the bed. Grasping the bottom of her short T-shirt, he raised it above her head to remove it. Much to his delight, he found that she had nothing on under it. Deciding her breast looked like it needed some attention, he lowered his head. At her groan, he smiled, but didn't stop. Deciding he wanted to continue in bed, he scooped her up and dropped her onto the soft mattress. Prepared this time, he pulled a condom out of his

back pocket. Then quickly discarding his clothes, he leapt onto the bed, causing it to shudder under his added weight.

* * * *

Daylight streamed through the cracks in the blinds, waking the couple lying blissfully in the bed. Dan opened his eyes first and watched Jenny for a full minute before she finally opened hers to look at him. She smiled and leaned in for a good-morning kiss. It was some time later before the couple made their appearance in the kitchen area.

"Marla, did you hear those funny noises last night?" Rich joked as the couple settled themselves at the table.

"Very funny, as if I haven't heard funny noises from your room before," a red-faced Jenny retorted.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Leave her alone, Rich. Ready for some breakfast? I've made up some scrambled eggs. Apparently none of the guys were scheduled to cook this morning," Marla offered.

"Eggs would be lovely. What do you want, Dan?"

"Marla doesn't need to wait on me. When you two are through with your breakfast, I'll find something for myself," Dan said.

"There's plenty. I made a bunch with you men in mind. I have toast and some bacon frying up in the oven. So have whatever you want."

"Thanks, if there's that much, I'm not stupid. I'll take you up on your offer. Get what you want, Jenny. Then I'll dish me up something."

The day went by quickly after breakfast. Before anyone knew it, it was time to go the center. Everyone had packed up after the lunch, which had come up in a tie again. Both men had excellent menus, and the group couldn't give high enough praise to either one of them.

"I don't know how we are going to pick a winner. Everything has been great," Tessa said as they were walking into the center from the buses.

"Well, we won't have any trouble picking out the loser," Bonnie said.

"Larry still has his second chance. He could blow us away."

"Or he could kill us," Doug said.

"Be nice. Larry can't help the way he is," Tessa scolded.

But before anyone could say anything else, they were greeted by

Martha. “There you are. I’ve been waiting. Are you going to do your rehearsal before you get ready, or after?”

“What do you guys want to do?” Bonnie called to the others, who were trailing her and Tessa.

“I’d rather do rehearsal before I get all painted up,” Larry answered for everyone.

“Okay, then get out there and hurry up. I’ve got some plans for the girls, and they’re going to take a fair ’mount of time,” Martha ordered.

“Well, you heard the boss. We better hurry,” Jenny said.

Dan took advantage of the time Jenny was on the stage rehearsing to talk to Tom and Kelly. The other two would be staying at the coaches. They had promised they wouldn’t leave them even if the president of the United States were calling for help.

Dan would be staying at the dressing area to check the women’s dressing room every fifteen minutes during the concert. He wanted the other two men to make rounds of the entire backstage area, checking the exits. Since the Superpages.com Center was an outdoor venue, it would be hard to patrol the seating area. The center had hired extra security for the performance at Marty’s insistence, and Dan was grateful for the help. Dan thought it best if the three stuck to the backstage area to make sure no one other than stage techs were allowed.

* * * *

After the freedom Jenny had enjoyed in Lubbock, when she had used a headset for the entire concert, she agreed to use one for the rest of the tour. She was very proud of herself, feeling this was a major breakthrough for her. *Must be Dan*. She thought the rehearsal had gone very well; however, now that she was in the dressing room with Martha, her good mood was rapidly evaporating.

“No, Martha, I’m not wearing that. I don’t think it’s legal anyway.” Jenny looked at the offending outfit as if it might reach out and bite her.

“It’s legal. I see it on television all the time,” Martha assured Jenny.

“What channel do you watch? That thing is indecent. We might as well be strutting around naked.” Jenny wasn’t a prude, but she had to draw the line somewhere.

"It's a bodysuit—you'll be covered from head to toe," Martha explained.

"Yeah, a see-through bodysuit. Martha, where do you get your ideas?" Jenny raised a brow in wonder at the older woman's imagination.

"I was talking to a friend of mine, and he suggested it."

"Figures it's a man. Did you tell him we weren't performing in the nudie show at the local bar?" Jenny was always amazed what Martha thought would be appropriate attire.

"Well, you could wear a vest or something. You could preserve your modesty that way."

"Martha, that doesn't make any sense. If we wear clothes over the bodysuit, why wear the bodysuit?"

"My point exactly, so you'll wear the bodysuit?"

"No," Jenny said in exasperation. Maybe she could get Marla and Tessa to help convince Martha they couldn't wear the suits. Bonnie would side with Martha.

"What's all the racket?" Bonnie asked as she entered the dressing room.

Jenny almost groaned, knowing that she was now outnumbered. Much to her relief, before she could answer the question, Marla, with Tessa on her heels, entered the room.

"Hey, what's going on? We could hear you down the hall," Tessa asked.

"Show them, Martha," was all Jenny would reply.

"Fine, I don't know what is wrong with it, but here, girls, tell me what you think." She held up the piece of transparent bodysuit for the others to see.

"What is it?" Marla asked.

"It's the costume that Martha has in her head for us to wear tonight," Jenny informed them.

Bonnie took the costume from Martha to get a better look and held it up by the shoulders. "Cool, I like it, Martha."

"You would," Marla said as she surveyed the garment.

"What goes over it?" Tessa's expression clearly revealed her bafflement.

"If something goes over it, why wear the bodysuit?" Bonnie pointed out.

"My point exactly," Jenny muttered.

"So we won't wear anything over it," Bonnie announced.

"Hello. I'm not wearing that," Tessa said at the same time Marla exclaimed that it would be a cold day in hell before she wore something like that.

"Okay, Martha, do we have a democracy here? Let's take a vote," Jenny declared.

"Yeah, take a vote when you know that it's three to two in your favor." It was Bonnie's turn to grumble.

Martha admitted defeat. "Girls, I'll find something else to wear. We're wasting time. You have to be ready soon."

Two hours later, Jenny tugged at the bottom of her bright pink vinyl outfit. Her muttering caused Dan to turn when he saw her, his eyes widened and he sputtered on the pop he'd been drinking. He gasped for air, and Jenny watched his throat work in a swallow.

"What in the world has Martha conned you into wearing? Is that painted on?"

"No. I do think we've been duped," Jenny stated as she wondered how she was going to breathe during the concert. Before she could elaborate on her statement, the other women left the dressing room. They were arrayed in various bright colors and looked like they stepped out of a sci-fi thriller.

"I've been thinking, Jenny. I think Martha knew we wouldn't wear that other outfit. She came up with these outfits way too fast for them not to have been planned." Marla was trying to pull her tight peacock-blue vinyl up to cover a little more of her cleavage.

Martha, walking close behind the girls, must have heard Marla's comment. She abruptly turned and hastily retreated back the way she had come.

Jenny thought over Marla's statement and remembered all of the times Martha had come up with outrageous costumes and how they always ended up wearing something just a little less provocative or outrageous. She must have thought that showing them something more revealing first would help her to get them to wear what she had planned in the first place. Looking at Marla, she said, "You know, Sherlock, I think you've got it."

"We'll not fall for that again," Tessa said.

Before any more discussion could be made, the warm-up band started to play their final song, and it was time to get ready to enter the stage.

Jenny had come out to join Dan who'd been standing with Rich and

Doug. The only two left to get ready were Larry and Jimmy, who showed up a few minutes later, and the group began preparations for their entrance.

"What's up?" Dan asked Jimmy.

Jenny thought Jimmy looked a little green. Maybe he'd tied one on last night.

"I don't know. I think I must have eaten something that didn't agree with me," Jimmy said with a protective hand over his stomach.

"Do you think you'll be all right on stage?" Rich asked in concern.

"Yeah, I asked a stage tech how I could get offstage if I needed to in a hurry. There's a place right behind where my drums are set up, only problem would be there would be no drums to whatever song you were playing," Jimmy assured them. Then it was time for their entrance, and Jimmy's malady was soon forgotten.

The audience was very enthusiastic about the vinyl outfits. Although the suits were identical in style, their colors couldn't have been more different. The suits were one-piece halters, and the backs were so low that if the wearer moved in a certain way, the top of her derrière would certainly show. The front consisted of two two-inch strips of vinyl that were attached to the hip-hugger shorts. Each strip pulled up and over a breast to tie behind the neck. The shorts were so short the women had to have a bikini wax before wearing them. Matching vinyl thigh-high boots, complete with stiletto heels, rounded out the outfit. Jenny decided to add her bright pink Rod Stewart wig since it matched. Luckily, none of the woman tripped wearing the high heels during the concert.

Martha is definitely on my shit list, Jenny thought when it came time to do her panther crawl toward the audience. She was so uncomfortable that she thought she would be cut in half. *Martha must be a sadist to make us wear these.* Jenny tried to pull herself back up into a stand without reaching back to pull her shorts out of her butt.

Not soon enough for Jenny, the concert was finally over. The group had gone out for their final curtain call when it became apparent they had no drummer. There were worried looks all around. As soon as she could, Jenny got to the side of the stage and signaled for the others so they could go in search of Jimmy to find out what was wrong.

Jenny had just stepped away from the bottom stair when she heard the scream. She turned just in time to see Bonnie topple down the stairs. She

was right behind Dan to get to Bonnie's side.

* * * *

"Bonnie, are you okay?" Dan and Jenny asked in unison.

"What?" Bonnie asked. She blinked her eyes a couple of times, then struggled to sit up, finally making it with Dan's help. She looked around with a blank look on her face. She seemed a little disoriented after the fall.

"How many fingers do you see?" Dan had two fingers held up in front of Bonnie, worried that she had a concussion.

"Two," Bonnie said as she brushed his hand away. "I think I was pushed."

"What?" Again Jenny and Dan spoke at the same time.

The others had been in front of Jenny coming down the stairs, so they had missed Bonnie's fall. But they were all coming back to gather around Bonnie.

"Are you sure?" Dan asked.

"I feel kind of muzzy. Let me think." Following her words, she pulled up her knees to rest her head on them, a mean feat in the outfit she wore.

Just then, at the top of the stairs, Jimmy appeared with a bewildered look on his face. "Hey, what happened?" he asked as he descended the stairs.

"Where have you been?" Rich demanded.

"I've been to the restroom. I told you I think I ate something bad," Jimmy clearly not understanding what had happened.

"Bonnie thinks someone pushed her," Dan told Jimmy. He knew where Jimmy had been. He'd seen him leave the stage during the last set, and although Dan had been the first down the stairs, he hadn't seen Jimmy come back yet. Jimmy would have had to come running back to get to Bonnie in time to push her. It was time to set his plan in motion.

Chapter Fourteen

"Bonnie, you stay where you are. I'm going to call an ambulance." Dan stood to find a quieter spot to call. Before he could leave, Bonnie caught his arm, trying to pull herself up along with him.

"No, I'm fine. I don't want to go to the hospital."

A man from the center spoke up from behind Dan. "Sorry, miss, because of the liability issues, you'll need to be checked out by a doctor."

"But I'm fine, really. I might have twisted my ankle, and I just have a little bump on the head." Bonnie's words sealed her fate. At the mention of her injuries, though slight, the man from the center called the ambulance himself.

"Sorry, Bonnie, looks like you don't have a choice. Jenny, come sit by Bonnie. I need to make a call," Dan said as he walked away.

"You're going to need to stay off the ankle for a few days. There's no sign of concussion, so that's good," the young paramedic informed Bonnie, twenty minutes later after thoroughly examining her. "I don't think you'll need to go to the hospital as long as you do what we ask."

"Wait a minute. I have to have her checked out by a doctor," the property manager argued.

"Look, I'll sign a waiver releasing you of any liability," Bonnie assured the man.

"You stay here while I go get the paperwork." Then he turned to the paramedics. "You stay here also, because I'm going to get your signatures in case anything happens."

They had all changed clothes, with the exception of Bonnie, by the time the Dallas police showed up. Dan had called them while Bonnie was arguing about going to the hospital. The officer who came looked to be a little wet behind the ears, but Dan figured that he'd do for what he had planned. Scanning the crowd of stage techs and band, he found Jimmy standing by

Bonnie, making sure she could walk.

“Officer.” Dan called the young man to him.

“Yes, sir.” The officer looked around, appearing a little uncomfortable.

“Officer?” Dan repeated. He could tell the young man was out of his element. He seemed intimidated by the flashing bulbs of the cameras. Dan was surprised to realize that he hardly noticed the paparazzi. Dan sighed and tried again. “Do you think sometime today we could get on with the arrest?” That seemed to bring the young man out of his daze.

“Yes, sir. Who did you want to arrest? Under what charge?” The young man brought himself up to his full height and stood ramrod straight.

“James Clark. He’s over there talking to the victim. I’ll discuss the charges when we get to the station. I have my reasons,” Dan added before the younger man could question him.

Dan led the officer over to Jimmy to make the arrest. He then stood back and let the officer take charge since he was out of his jurisdiction. He tried to ignore the shocked and hurt faces of the rest of the band. He had known they weren't going to like it, but hadn't realized how hard it would be to seemingly betray them.

“Hey, I haven't done anything. Bonnie, tell them I didn’t push you,” Jimmy pleaded when the officer pulled his wrists back for the handcuffs.

“It'll be a lot better for you if you come along peacefully,” the young officer urged.

Dan was glad Greg had lined up contacts and somehow finagled cooperation from the departments along the tour route. He knew it had more to do with Ted, Collette’s boyfriend, the mayor. It made everything look official in case Runner was watching. The last thing he wanted was for the bastard to see through his charade.

“Dan, how could you?” Jenny apparently forgetting she had given Dan her trust.

“I’m sorry. Under the circumstances and the events of the last couple of days, I have no choice. I’ll go along to the station with him to get his statement and make sure everything is taken care of.” Dan started to turn, but Jenny caught his arm.

“I’m going with you. I’m not going to let you railroad Jimmy, Dan. I don’t believe for a minute he could have pushed Bonnie.”

“No, you stay here and call Marty. Make arrangements for a new

drummer to catch up with us in Memphis," Dan instructed. He wondered why Jenny was being so difficult. He'd asked her to trust him. Didn't she realize he had a plan?

"I'm going with you, Dan, end of discussion." Dan gritted his teeth as he regarded Jenny, who stood with arms folded over her chest. Stubborn was all he could think of, she was letting him know in no uncertain terms she had made up her mind. She would be going with him.

"Fine, come along. A station house is not a fun place to spend an evening. Don't say I didn't warn you." Dan turned and didn't bother to check to see if she was following.

Dan opened the door of the squad car, ushered Jenny into the front seat, and then told the officer he'd ride in back with Jimmy. When the officer protested, Dan sent him a look that could intimidate the best of them, and it worked on the young officer. He just cleared his throat and went around to his side of the car to climb in.

There was silence in the car all the way to the police station. Once there, they were led to a private room, and after a few minutes, they were joined by another police officer, this one more seasoned. He had to be into his fifties, but didn't look a day over thirty-five. Dan wondered if he was just lucky or if he had to work at it.

"I'm Sergeant Dixon." He stretched his hand toward Dan.

"I'm Detective Janson." Dan decided, as first impressions went, the man seemed to be genuine, and not a hotshot know-it-all.

"I've known your captain for a number of years. I just got off the phone with him to give him the new developments. Said to tell you hi, and he has already talked the group's agent. You'll have a new drummer when you reach Memphis."

"How could Marty do that to Jimmy? Don't tell me you've convinced Marty Jimmy's been writing the notes." When Jenny ran out of steam, she must have finally realized what was going on. First, she stared at Jimmy, who almost had an amused look on his face, as if this were all a great joke. Then she turned to look at Dan. He raised his eyebrow, and dawning bloomed over her beautiful face. Finally she must be putting the pieces together and hopefully remembering his words to her. *Then let me do my job, and trust that everything I do, I do for a reason. Don't forget that.*

"You don't believe it's Jimmy, do you?" Jenny looked pointedly at Dan.

"No, I don't. But someone wants us to believe it."

"Jimmy, did you know Dan was going to arrest you tonight?"

"How could I? Neither one of us knew Bonnie was going to be pushed. Besides, I ate the same food everyone else did at lunch and dinner last time. Why was I the only one sick?" Jimmy replied.

"I agree with the young man. Greg has brought me up to date on what has happened. Sounds like from the beginning, this Runner has set up the trail of circumstances to lead you to Jimmy, the ex-boyfriend," Officer Dixon added.

"I'm only an ex-boyfriend if you consider one high school date as a relationship," Jimmy joked.

"Wait a minute. If you didn't know about this, why did you calmly let yourself be arrested?" Jenny glared at Dan as if she had been left out of the joke.

"Dan advised me before the tour, if the circumstantial evidence kept stacking up, he'd have no choice to follow up on the leads. So he just told me to be prepared when it happened."

"Jenny, we're going to be here a while going over the plan. Why don't you let Officer Dixon get someone to take you back to the coach?" Dan suggested. Now that she was here, he hoped she'd say no so that he could keep her close.

"No, I'm here until you leave. I want to be in on the plan so I know what's going on."

"You won't be able to tell even Marla or Rich. Somehow information is leaking out, either on purpose or because someone knows a person on the inside," Dan instructed.

"Dan, it's my life here. I have a vested interest," Jenny promised.

"Okay with you, Jimmy?" Dan asked.

"Yes. So what is this big plan you have? You have me arrested, but you have nothing on me."

"No one knows that. Officer Dixon is going to help us get you out of here without being seen. I'm sure Runner is watching with curiosity to see what we do with you. So we're going to keep you with us," Dan explained.

"How can I go?"

"Jimmy's not. Runner will think you've been detained. So Grogen will be at the next concert with his hippy girlfriend."

"Who's Grogen?" Jenny and Jimmy said together.

"Marty hired him to take Jimmy's place," Dan explained again, although the two still hadn't caught on.

"I feel like Larry must all the time. I guess I'm being dense. If this Grogen person is going to take my place, how will I be with the group?" Jimmy questioned.

"Wait, I get it. Jimmy *is* Grogen," Jenny exclaimed when she figured out what Dan had meant.

"Right, and his hippy girlfriend will be one of my coworkers. Greg has briefed her on what's going on, and she'll help me keep an eye on things. This time no one must know. My cover was blown almost as soon as I walked into the amphitheater back in San Diego. But no one will know anything about Grogen." Dan turned at the knock on the door.

* * * *

Officer Dixon stood and walked from the chair where he was enjoying listening to Jimmy and Jenny trying to piece Dan's plan together. It could get boring around the station, and this was something different; now the next part of the plan was about to start. Dixon opened the door, and a young woman with a makeup case walked in.

"This is Sandra. She's my niece. She's the makeup artist for our local theatre. She's going to give you a makeover, Jimmy my boy." Dixon laughed as he made his way back to his chair to watch the rest of the entertainment.

"So you're going to give me my new image?" Jimmy asked.

"No, this is just the disguise you will have to get out of the station," she replied.

"So then I'll have another disguise in Memphis?" Jimmy looked at Dan in question.

"Yes," Dan answered. "We don't want Runner recognizing you as you leave the station. We're going to tell the others you are be extradited back to San Diego for questioning."

"Okay, so how do I become this Grogen?"

"Marty, Paul, and your new girlfriend will meet you at the airport. Marty's taking care of your transformation at that point. By the time we get

checked into the bed-and-breakfast, you will be ready and waiting for us." Dan completed explaining the plan.

Jimmy had been listening intently and seemed to be fine with the arrangements. Dixon watched him look over to see what Sandra was taking out for his transformation, which included a long blond wig.

"Hold on. I'm not wearing that wig."

"Yes, you are, and you'll look very fetching in it. Look, I have a nice, sexy red dress to go with it." Laughing, Sandra held up the mentioned dress.

Dixon laughed out loud when Jimmy looked to Jenny for help and, finding none, turned to Dan. "Why do I have to wear a dress? Can't I just be an old man or something?"

"Runner is probably watching, and he'll be looking for a man or someone in disguise. But there are so many hookers that come and go in this place that I thought you'd blend nicely. Look, you're slim. We may have to add a little padding in some areas, but overall, you have the perfect body for the disguise."

"Hey, I may not be buff like you, but I look like a man." Jimmy exclaimed indignantly.

"I didn't say you didn't. I just said you had a perfect body for the disguise. To help with the role-playing, if it makes it easier you could always pretend you dressed in drag all the time," Dan commented.

"Ha, ha, very funny. Okay, let's get on with this. The sooner I get to the airport and get of here, the sooner I can get this over with."

After that, Sandy set to work her magic on Jimmy. By the time she was finished, even Jimmy's mother wouldn't have known him, or so they hoped. With the transformation complete, Jenny and Dan left the station, first promising to follow up with Dixon to let him know the outcome. It was planned for Jimmy to go to the airport with Dixon about half an hour to an hour after the pair left. They didn't want to take a chance that Runner would recognize Jimmy. Hopefully, Runner would follow Dan and Jenny.

* * * *

Well, there goes Jenny and her shadow. Runner sat across the street from the station drinking bourbon at a local bar. What luck. Runner could blend right in and not cause suspicion while watching the front door of the

police station. *Looks like they are going to keep young Jimmy, good*. Finally something was going as planned. Jenny could have one more chance to redeem herself. *I'll keep my original plan, unless Jenny disappoints me again.* Looking around the bar, Runner thought that it seemed to be a pretty fun place with good music and good-looking chicks. *I might as well kill some time here.* A while later, with the second bourbon in hand, Runner happened to glance across the street as an attractive hooker was being escorted out of the station by one of Dallas's finest. Chuckling, thinking that the cop was going to get lucky that night, Runner paid the tab and stood to leave.

* * * *

"Well, do you think it worked?" Jenny asked Dan as they drove back to the coach.

"Only time will tell. If Runner did stay to watch, he wouldn't recognize Jimmy because he made one good-looking woman. If I wasn't taken, I might have tried to pick him up," Dan joked.

"Very funny, I'll be glad when this is over and we can get on with our lives. I'm getting tired of looking over my shoulder and wondering who could be doing this to me. I've come to the conclusion it has to be someone close, and it just gives me the creeps." Jenny sighed as she watched the city pass by. *The only good thing that has come out of this is Dan,* she thought, turning her head to look at him.

Warmth sizzled up her hand when Dan reached over and took her hand. "It will be over soon. I promise."

Chapter Fifteen

"I know you want to go, dear, but I don't think it's wise. Not with everything that's going on with Jenny and this madman who is stalking her," Ted said to Collette, looking at her over the morning paper he was reading.

"I'm trying to make things up to Jenny about her childhood. If I went to her birthday in Memphis, maybe she'd realize how hard I'm trying," Collette said.

"I just don't like the fact that Rich or Marla, or even Marty, didn't call to invite you. Why did they have a stage tech call?" Something just didn't sound right to Ted.

"Because they were busy, and the tech said they were having trouble finding a private place to call me without Jenny finding out. They want to surprise her."

"I just don't like it. Let me call Marty and check it out," Ted said in a tone that he would brook no argument. Picking up the phone, he dialed the office number for Marty. When the assistant answered, Ted asked to speak with either Marty or Paul. Unfortunately, neither man was available. According to the assistant, they were both out of the office for an undetermined amount of time.

"Collette, do you have Marty's home number?"

"Why would I have his home number?"

Ted just gave her a look that said he didn't believe she didn't have it.

"Okay, here it is. You know that I have all the information about anyone connected with my daughter. I may not have been a great mother…"

Ted didn't say anything when she paused, and the silence stretched.

"Okay, I was a wretched mother, but I'm trying to make up for it, and I will if it takes the rest of my life."

"I know you are, dear. Thanks," Ted said when she handed him her phone book. He found the number and dialed. The housekeeper answered

the phone and told him that the pair was out of town for a week, and asked if he would like to leave a message. Ted informed her he did not need to leave a message.

"They must have left for Memphis already. Look, Collette, I can't get out of the meeting with the city council in the morning, but if you wait until tomorrow afternoon, I'll go with you."

"If I go in the morning, you can follow in the afternoon, and you'll be there by the end of the party. Then you'll be there if I need you."

"Okay, but I still have a bad feeling about this. I'm going to call Greg and get someone to go with you." Raising a hand when he saw that she was about to interrupt, he continued. "If you want to go, there'll be no arguments. Someone goes with you or you wait until I can go with you, your choice." Ted waited for his answer.

"You win. Call Greg. I'm going to go pack. I've made my reservation on Delta. It leaves at six-thirty in the morning, so I'll need to get there at least an hour and a half early for security." She only smiled at him when he gave her a disgruntled look.

"I should have known." Ted shook his head as he picked up the phone to call Greg.

Even though Ted didn't need to get up as early to get to his meeting, he insisted on riding with Collette to the airport the next morning. After dropping her off, he had a few hours to kill, so he decided he might as well go into his office to get some things done. He just couldn't shake the feeling he had. As soon as he was out of his meeting, he would call Jenny and let her know her mother was coming and be damned with the surprise.

* * * *

As she got off the plane in Memphis several hours later, Collette felt like a limp noodle after the long flight. About to tell Officer O'Riley she was going to the powder room, she saw a young man holding a sign with her name on it. She detoured in that direction, knowing Officer O'Riley would follow.

"Hi, I'm Collette McGregor," she told the young man.

"Ms. McGregor, we have a car waiting for you just outside. We'll take you to your hotel first so you can settle in," the young man informed her.

"That's nice. Do you mind if I run to the powder room and freshen up for a moment? Officer O'Riley, could you get my case when you get yours?" she asked as she started to walk away, assuming he'd jump to do her bidding.

* * * *

"Yes," he said to her retreating back, and to the youth, he said, "I'll go get her bags. Should I bring them back here?"

"No, we'll meet you outside of the baggage claims, in about five minutes, or longer depending on how long the lady takes to freshen up."

"I'll go get her bags and then wait outside then," he said and set off in the direction of the baggage claim. He hesitated when he remembered the captain's instruction not to leave Collette's side, no matter what. Then he continued. After all, their ride was already there to pick them up. And the escort would be waiting for Collette to take her to the car.

* * * *

Collette felt much better after repairing her makeup and hair. Leaving the restroom, she stopped in indecision. She hadn't told either the young man or Officer O'Riley where she would meet them. As she started to turn toward where she had seen the two, pain exploded through her head, and it seemed as if the floor started to slant, causing her to fall. The last thought to cross her mind as the world went black was, *I should have listened to Ted.*

* * * *

"Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me," O'Riley chanted under his breath as he retraced his steps, *again*, looking for Ms. McGregor. When he had waited in front for their ride for over fifteen minutes and no one had shown up, he realized he'd been duped. The captain was going to have his job. Not only had he disobeyed his orders, he also had lost the mayor's main squeeze. *Man, can it get any worse?* Finally deciding it was time to call in the troops, he raised the phone to his ear in dread.

"Captain, got bad news." O'Riley cut to the chase, no use trying to

excuse himself. There were no excuses that would change what had happened. “Ms. McGregor’s gone.” Pulling the phone away from his ear he waited until the shouting died down then when it stopped he continued, “Someone came to pick us up, Ms. McGregor went to the ladies’ room, and I went to get the bags. We were to meet the driver out front of baggage claim.”

Listening to the tirade, he realized that he really was going to be looking for other employment because he’d really fucked up. What was he going to tell his wife, with his daughter just starting school and all of the expenses incurred? He was probably going to get divorced because of this, too. Then the voice of his boss penetrated his thoughts.

“Yeah, I’m listening. I’ve been all over this place a hundred times. She’s gone. The driver never showed up to pick me up. Whoever it was must have hired the youth to meet us. Then they nabbed her at the ladies’ room after I went to the baggage claim.” O’Riley pulled the phone away from his ear.

“I don’t care how you do it, but find her and get her back, or I can’t be responsible for what the mayor will do to you. I’ll call the mayor and give him the bad news. That will buy you a few hours before he arrives in Memphis to wipe the floor with your ass.” Captain Martin was shouting so loud any passerby could hear. Then the connection was lost, and O’Riley was left holding the smoldering phone.

He smiled a little at an elderly lady staring at him. Putting the phone in his back pocket, he hailed a cab; put his cases, along with Ms. McGregor’s, into the trunk; and told the cabbie to take him to the Memphis police station.

Chapter Sixteen

"Looks like we'll be in Memphis in about four hours. We left Dallas about six in the morning while you babies were still asleep," Jason announced when Jenny and Dan poked their heads out of the bedroom for their morning coffee and tea.

Jenny yawned and said sleepily, "Good, that will put us at the B and B about one or so." Then turning to Dan, she continued. "Will Marty and Paul be at the bed-and-breakfast to greet us?"

"If nothing went wrong last night, they should be ready and waiting to introduce us to the new drummer."

Marla came out of her door and, hearing the last of the conversation scowled at Dan. "I can't believe you arrested Jimmy. He wouldn't hurt Jenny."

"Dear, the notes have never been threatening toward Jenny. Jimmy is obsessed with her. I'm surprised he kept it hidden this long," Rich said as he sat down next to Jenny and grabbed a piece of toast out of the toaster before anyone else could.

"Hey, that was mine," Jenny exclaimed.

"How can all of you just sit there like nothing happened? This is Jimmy we're talking about. He's like our family," Marla said in a disbelieving voice.

"Marla, I had no choice but to arrest him. Everything points to him. I have no other leads or clues. Am I to go by his word and let him remain free to harm you or anyone else in the group?" Dan asked.

"Put that way, I guess not, but it's Jimmy." she all but wailed.

"He's on his way back to San Diego to be questioned. If he has nothing to hide, then he needn't worry. He'll back with us before you know it." Dan tried to soothe her.

"I guess that's something. I know in my heart he hasn't done anything."

"I hope you're right," Rich responded before Dan could. He patted his wife's hand.

"Let's change the subject." Jenny requested. "With all the hubbub when you guys came home from the mall, I forgot to ask if you found a dress."

"Yes, I love it." Marla looked to Rich.

"She looks quite fetching in it." Rich grinned at his wife. "I didn't realize how happy I was about the new baby until I saw her in her first maternity dress."

"What does it look like? I can't wait." Jenny wanted to know every detail.

"Not going to tell you." Marla winked at her husband and refused to say another word.

Sighing, Jenny looked at Rich, but at his grin and shake of the head, she knew that no information was forthcoming from Marla's better half.

"Fine, don't tell me. I can wait for tonight, even if it does kill me," Jenny complained.

"Buck up, Red. By the looks on the lovebirds' faces, the wait will be worth it." Dan chuckled, but before he could go on, the coach cell phone rang.

Jason picked up the phone. "Hey." He listened for a moment, then passed the phone back to Jenny, telling everyone that it was Bonnie.

"Hey, Bon, what's up? I thought you'd still be asleep for another hour."

"I would have been if it wasn't for Larry, and believe me, he's going to pay," Bonnie retorted.

By the sound of her voice, Jenny cringed for Larry and the consequences he would no doubt suffer. "That still doesn't answer my question. What's going on?" Jenny repeated.

"Nothing, other than I'm going to have to miss your party." Bonnie sounded forlorn.

"Why?"

"Because I forgot to tell my friend not to pick me up until tomorrow, and she just called to tell me she's already waiting in Memphis." Bonnie always visited her friend from Juilliard when they stopped in Memphis. Since they always planned on a three-day stay with the concert being the on last night, Bonnie always took off the first night and came back just in time for the concert.

"Can't you bring her to the party? We'd love to meet her. In all these years, we've never had a chance to." Jenny had always asked to meet Bonnie's friend, but there were always excuses, and it seemed like it would be the same this time.

"Come on, Jen, you know how my friends are. They like to keep to themselves. She wouldn't come dressed for a party, and she'd feel out of place."

Sighing, Jenny replied, "All right, but I'm going to miss you, girlfriend."

"Have a margarita for me," Bonnie said in a relieved voice. "I bought the best present for you at the mall yesterday. That's what I was going to give you when I barged in on you and the hunk." Bonnie growled, emphasizing her thoughts about Dan.

"I get your point, and he's all mine." Jenny chuckled.

"I'll drop by your room and give you your surprise before I take off, okay?"

"That's fine, but you really didn't need to get me anything. Everyone's making too much of my birthday. It's just because it's while we're on the road."

"I wanted to give it to you, Jen, so I'll see you when we get there." Bonnie hung up before Jenny could even say good-bye.

"I gather from your side of the conversation that Bonnie won't be at your birthday dinner?" Dan asked.

"Bonnie has a friend she went to Juilliard with who lives just over the border in Arkansas. She always visits the first two days we're in town," Marla explained.

Dan asked the same question Jenny had of Bonnie. "Why doesn't she just bring her friend?"

"She told me that her friend wouldn't come dressed for a party, and she wouldn't feel comfortable. Apparently her friend comes from a family that is private. Bonnie actually refers to them as *her people*," Jenny explained, repeating Bonnie's excuse.

"Well, we'll have a drink for her, how's that?" Marla said. "I know you wanted everyone there. Now, two of your good friends will be missing. Don't worry. We'll have to make sure that you have such a good time, Jimmy and Bonnie won't be missed."

Before they knew it, the coaches were pulling up in front of a historical mansion, a couple of blocks away from Beale Street, that had been made into a bed-and-breakfast. There were two buildings. One housed only rooms to rent, and the other had a breakfast bar and table area for the guests to gather for meals if they chose to. Above the eating area, on the second floor, there were more rooms. When the group came to Memphis, they stayed there because there were just enough of them to book all the rooms for the nights they were in town.

A small, plump woman came bustling out, and when the door of the first coach opened, she was there to greet everyone.

"Jennée!" she exclaimed as she threw her arms around the much taller woman. "It eez so good to zee you again." she said with her soft French accent.

"Rose, you're lovely as always. How have you been?" Jenny asked when the small woman finally stepped back.

"I've been, what you say, uh, swamped with peeples. It eez very good for business." Rose spotted Marla and Rich and went to greet them, coming up short when she all but ran into Dan.

"Whoa, who eez the giant man?"

"Rose, this is Detective Janson. He'll want to talk to you about the security of the building. It's a long story, but we'll fill you in." Jenny felt bad that they could be bringing trouble to Rose's doorstep. She was very fond of the woman. Hopefully nothing would happen while they were at the bed-and-breakfast.

"*Mon Dieu!* This can't be good if you have a les officer with you," Rose exclaimed.

"Let's get everyone settled. Then Dan and I will tell you all about it." Without another word, Jenny hustled the group into the building to get their things to their rooms and promised to meet everyone in the breakfast room in twenty minutes, where Marty and Paul would be introducing their new drummer.

Because arrangements had been made at the beginning of the trip, Dan and Jenny had separate rooms. Dan thought it best to keep them so Runner wouldn't have anything else to hold against Jenny. They went their separate ways, both promising to meet with Rose in her office in ten minutes, before the others gathered.

After they filled Rose in, she wasn't thrilled, but her main concern was for Jenny's safety. She told them she would give the group the security codes so that they could leave the alarm on during the day. Dan wrote the codes down to take with him, saying they would do their best to keep trouble from causing problems for Rose. Jenny went to the other house, where the breakfast bar was, to wait for everyone. Dan took the codes back to his room to lock in his briefcase.

"Marty. Paul," Jenny exclaimed. "I'm so glad to see you."

"Jenny." Paul sighed and gave her a big bear hug and then waited while Marty gave her his customary kiss and hug. "This is Grogen."

Jenny turned to the man Paul indicated and tried to see the Jimmy she knew under his disguise. His normally dark hair was cut short and was spiky and blond with dark tips. He had a dangling pierced earring, lip ring, and a nose ring. His clothes looked like something Martha would have dressed him in for a concert. His jeans were faded with frayed holes at each knee. The finishing touch was the skintight Scooby Doo T-shirt. With rings on every finger, Jenny wondered how he was going to play the drums. Celtic-design tattoos covered his arms.

"How do you do, Grogen? Welcome aboard," Jenny finally said, amazed at the transformation of her friend.

Before Jimmy could respond, Paul continued with the introductions.

"And this is Grogen's girlfriend, Sunshine. Apparently she goes everywhere with him." The only response was a loud pop of Sunshine's gum.

Jenny turned her attention to the woman at Jimmy's side. She was surprised to see someone far from what a police officer would look like. "Nice to meet you." Jenny extended a hand, but again the only response was the smacking of Sunshine's gum.

The woman, or rather girl, had bleached blonde hair on top and dark hair underneath. She had it pulled up in a side-of-the-head ponytail, to show off the two tones. Her skirt lay smooth to the bottom her hips where it gathered and flounced out to the middle of her thighs. Her white T-shirt only had one cap sleeve, leaving the other shoulder bare. The gold chains hanging from her neck and wrists jingled as she walked. She had bare legs and wore little white ankle socks with lace around the cuffs and red stiletto shoes on her dainty feet. Big gold hoops dangled at her ears with several

little golden beads lining the outside of her earlobes one had a chain that looped and hooked on the side of her nose where she had a pierced loop. Her makeup was applied with a heavy hand. She wore bold eyeliner, thick mascara, and dark red lipstick that was definitely not her color.

Dan played his role to perfection, walking in and never batting an eye at the girl he had known for years. “Come on, let’s sit down. The rest of the group should be here in a moment.”

The others began to file in. This time Marty made the introductions to the group.

“Hi, everyone. Glad to see all of you here. Bonnie, I’m glad you weren’t hurt more seriously. I’m sorry that you had to get in Jimmy’s way, seems none of us knew him like we thought we did.” When everyone began to grumble that he hadn’t been found guilty yet, Marty held up his hand and continued, “I know. However, everything points to him. He’s being questioned now by the San Diego police. They won’t charge him if they decide he’s innocent. Only when he is cleared will he be able to join the group again. I think you all agree that Jenny’s safety is the important issue here?” He left the question hanging in the air and waited for the murmurs to stop.

“Okay, I want you all to welcome our new drummer, or at least our drummer until Jimmy is cleared. This is Grogen,” Marty introduced.

“Grogen what?” Larry to Jenny and whispered in her ear, “That guy looks kind of scary. Maybe he is the real Runner, and he made it look like it was Jimmy so he could get on the inside. And the girl with him doesn’t look any better.”

Jenny just raised her eyebrows at his thinking and didn’t respond.

Marty continued as if he hadn’t been interrupted. “Just Grogen, and this is his girlfriend, Sunshine.”

“Well, welcome, I’m glad you could step into Jimmy’s place on such short notice, Grogen. Nice to meet you, Sunshine.” Dan stood and walked to shake the young man’s hand. He tried not to smile over the name they had given Candace James, his coworker. The name fit the image, though, and the two actually made a cute couple.

“Yeah, no problem, man. This is a great gig, couldn’t pass it up,” Jimmy replied, trying to disguise his voice to fit the personality he had come up with for Grogen.

"Nice to meet you too, sir," Sunshine answered on another loud pop of her gum that made Dan wince.

Then everyone went their separate ways, promising to meet at six that evening to go to B. B. King's. Bonnie gave everyone a hug and told them to have a great time and she'd see them in a couple of days.

* * * *

"Jen, come with me for a minute. I want to give you your birthday present," Bonnie said as she took Jenny's hand to steer her out of the room, to the stairs.

"I'll meet you in a while," Jenny said to Dan over her shoulder as Bonnie all but dragged her out of the room.

Once the two were alone, Bonnie went to her bag and pulled out a beautifully wrapped box and handed it to Jenny. While Jenny shook the box and admired the wrapping, Bonnie perched on the antique writing desk that complemented the room's decoration. She enjoyed watching Jenny's face. She could be so animated. Bonnie got along with everyone in the band, but Jenny was the only one who didn't pass judgment on her. Jenny was so genuine. "I'm sorry I didn't think to arrange for my friend to pick me up tomorrow so I could attend your party, Jenny. I feel bad. I hope you like the present, though," she said.

"Oh, Bonnie, you didn't need to buy me this. It's way too extravagant," Jenny said. "I can't believe you bought such a beautiful outfit. I only expected a trinket or something."

"I saw it and thought, 'That looks just like Jenny.' It just seemed to jump out and say, 'Buy me,' so I did." Bonnie shrugged.

"Well, it's just beautiful, and I'm going to wear it tonight and tell everyone my good friend Bonnie bought me this for my birthday." Jenny stood and walked over to the desk where Bonnie perched and gave her a hug. Then she told Bonnie to be safe and have a good time with her friend.

"I will. You be safe while I'm gone. Tell that hunk of yours, if anything happens to you, he's got me to answer to," Bonnie promised before picking up her bag and walking out with Jenny.

* * * *

Jenny stood and watched as Bonnie drove away in the taxi taking her to meet her friend. She shook her head in wonder why Bonnie felt she couldn't have her friend pick her up at the bed-and-breakfast. *Why are you hiding us from your friend?* Someday she would sit Bonnie down and get the whole story.

* * * *

Something wet splashed on Collette's face, which made her wince. Slowly, she opened her eyes and tried to focus. She seemed to be in an empty warehouse of some kind. She was alone. Looking around to find the source of the wetness, she looked up to see a steady drip. The source seemed to be the water pipes hanging from the ceiling. Bare light bulbs lit the area of her prison.

Trying to stand so she could explore, Collette found herself unable to move. Her feet were tied to the chair, and her hands felt as if they were bound with duct tape behind her back. Her bindings were so tight she had lost all feeling in her hands and feet. Looking straight ahead, she saw a door and realized that, in her position, she would be the first thing seen when someone walked in the door.

Collette wondered how long she had been there. She had a headache that would kill a large moose. Craning her neck, she looked everywhere to see if there was anything she could use to get loose, but there was nothing she could do with her arms and legs tied. She doubted that she could stand even if she was untied. Thinking hard, she tried to send a mental message to Ted. *Help, Ted.* It always worked on her soap opera. Hopefully it would work for her. The sound of a door opening broke into her thoughts and announced the arrival of her captor.

Runner strolled in. "Well, look at Miss High-and-Mighty Slut. You think you've become better than anybody, dating your high-profile boyfriend. Well, you're not, but the good-hearted soul that Jenny is, she'll still try and save you."

"You." Collette was shocked when she discovered who had been terrorizing her daughter. "I thought you were friends with my daughter."

"Oh, we're more than friends, Collette—may I call you Collette? After

all, I'm going to be the last person you see on Earth." At Collette's gasp, Runner laughed. "Well, just maybe you might see Jenny right before you die, if she follows my instructions."

"Why are you doing this?" Collette was confused. The notes and the content of the notes didn't make any more sense now that she knew who it was.

"It isn't what I had planned, and it's your fault for bringing the police in. That's why you have to die," Runner muttered in rage. "If you hadn't talked Jenny into the police, the original plan would have worked. Jenny would have realized by the end of the tour that we are soul mates. Then we'd go off to our own little hideaway I've had built just for the two of us."

Collette was about to argue that Jenny had called her, but something about Runner's eyes made her realize that reasoning would fall on deaf ears. Behind her back, Collette worked the duct tape to see if she could loosen it, but it was on tight, and it seemed the more she tried to loosen it, the tighter it became.

"Look, why don't you let me talk to Jenny? I'm sure we can work this out." Collette decided if she couldn't get loose, maybe she could talk Runner into letting her loose to go to Jenny.

"Shut up, bitch," Runner shouted, dashing Collette's hopes. Then Runner just turned around and slammed out of the door, leaving Collette to wonder what would happen next.

* * * *

Just as Jenny finished hanging the new outfit in the closet, there was a knock on the door. She paused before opening and called out a "Who's there?" as she'd been instructed. When Dan answered, she let him in. He took her by the hand and led her to the overstuffed antique chair in the corner. Sitting down, he pulled her onto his lap.

"Happy birthday, Red," he said and then pulled her face down to his so he could give her a tender kiss, then drew away before it got out of hand.

"Thank you."

"I wanted to give you your present in private." Dan tried adjusting Jenny to one knee while he maneuvered to get something out of his pocket. After nearly losing the battle and almost dislodging Jenny from his knee, he

pulled out a small, gaily wrapped box.

"What's this?" Jenny's heart was pounding. They hadn't known each other that long. It couldn't be what the box suggested, although if it was, her answer would be yes.

"I called my mother when we were in Phoenix and had her ship this to me here. I wanted to give you something special. It belonged to my grandmother. She passed away last year, left it to me to give to my wife. She had faith I'd find someone else." Dan paused when Jenny couldn't hold in her gasp. Soft as it was, he must have heard. When he continued, his words were delivered in a soft, intimate way, almost as if he realized that she'd thought it was an engagement ring. "It was her favorite pendant." He handed the box to Jenny to open.

Jenny felt a flutter of disappointment, but as the paper fell away and she pulled open the box, her delight took over when she saw the delicate necklace of gold, garnet, and diamonds. It was a gold Celtic cross with a garnet nestled in the middle of diamond chips. It was perfect.

"Oh, it's beautiful." Jenny pulled it out and handed it to Dan to help her with the clasp as she put it on.

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"No, you're beautiful, Red. I love you." Dan paused when the words came out, but realized that he meant them. For the first time in five years, he felt complete. And he knew that when this ordeal was over, he'd be ready to declare it to the world with the engagement ring she had clearly thought was in the box.

With tears in her eyes, Jenny leaned down a little, and just before her lips touched his, she whispered the same to him. Then her lips touched his, the box fell to the floor, and Dan stood with an arm around her so she wouldn't fall. He kept contact with her mouth the entire time while he bent down and scooped her up to take her to the bed.

A while later while Jenny, her eyes closed and a dreamy, satisfied smile gracing her lips, rested her head on his arm, Dan bent his head and kissed her forehead. As he did, she turned her head to try to catch his lips for a real kiss, never opening her eyes. After what seemed like hours, the kiss ended. Dan sighed, settled back down into the soft mattress, and grinned at the

ceiling. He couldn't remember ever feeling so satisfied and alive. Just then, a shiver ran through him, followed by a sense of impending doom. He slanted his head and looked at Jenny to see if she felt it too. But she was still lying there with the same smile, and he decided not to say anything and ruin the peaceful look.

* * * *

Jenny smiled as she remembered how she had to shoo Dan out of the room so she could get ready for the party. He hadn't wanted to go, but she wanted to look extra special, so after finally getting rid of him, she showered and applied her makeup carefully so it was understated and made her eyes look bigger without looking overdone. It was a trick that Martha had taught all of them when she had first joined their little family. Martha would be at the party that evening; Jenny would give her a hug for all she had taught her. Jenny had never thought she would want to use any of the techniques Martha had taught her over the years. But now she was glad she had listened. It would pay off that evening when she saw Dan's look of appreciation.

Looking in the mirror, Jenny marveled at the fit. She couldn't have picked an outfit that fit her better or looked as good. The top wasn't a blouse or a T-shirt but a soft, silky, rose-colored glove of a shirt lying smooth against her that accentuated her small, firm breasts and, resting at her hips, barely touched the material of her skirt. The skirt was the same silky fabric, only in a rose floral with two layers. It wrapped around her slim hips, stopping just below her mid-thigh. She decided to leave her smooth, tanned legs bare and wear a pair of two-inch spike-heeled flip-flops. They seemed to be all the rage at the moment. With care, she put on the pendant to nestle between her breasts. She would wear it always as a symbol of her love for Dan. She smiled at the sentiment and even laughed a little. She had never thought she would feel like this about anyone.

There was a knock at the outside door, interrupting her thoughts. Her room could be accessed from the hall of the house and by a door leading into the courtyard between the two houses. Wondering who it could be, she drew the curtain back a little at the side of the door to peek out. Seeing a delivery boy holding a vase with roses in it, she smiled and opened the door.

"Hi, those are gorgeous." Jenny exclaimed when she saw there had to be at least two dozen long-stem red roses in a beautiful crystal vase with a rose ribbon around it.

"Ma'am, are you Ms. McGregor?"

"Yes." Jenny took the vase from the boy and put them on the table, only pausing for a moment to admire them. She told the boy to wait while she rummaged in her bag for a tip. When she turned around, the boy was gone. She walked to the door and looked out, but he was nowhere to be seen. Frowning, she went back to her bag and put the money back, then went to the flowers. She smiled, thinking that Dan was too extravagant to give her flowers on top of the pendant. She grabbed the card and thought to herself as she opened it the card seemed familiar, then froze when she read the words.

Well, Jenny girl,
you didn't get rid of the detective as I asked.
Time to pay the piper.
If you want to see your mother alive, or should I call her Collette as you do?
Never mind, doesn't matter.
If you want to see her, come WITHOUT bringing your bodyguard
to the Peabody Hotel. Stand by the fountain where the ducks march to and from.
Be there in the next half hour.
There will be a car to pick you up and take you to Collette.
She's dead if you tell anyone.
See you soon,
Runner.

Jenny sat down without thinking. Luckily she was standing by the end of the bed, and it caught her before she hit the ground. Staring at the note, she wondered what she should do. She knew she should tell Dan, but she couldn't risk her mother's life. Looking at her watch, she saw Dan would be expecting her in the breakfast room in less than five minutes. If she left, it wouldn't give her enough time to leave without him noticing. *I need to stall. What should I do?* Then inspiration struck. She bent, took off her left shoe, and twisted the heel until it came loose. Making sure she didn't break it

completely, she stood on it and tested it. It felt that, if she was careful, she'd be able to walk on it. Deciding not to take a chance, Jenny walked over to the breakfast room barefooted.

Holding her shoes in one hand, Jenny stood outside of the house by the door that led to the area everyone intended to meet in to go to the party. Leaning down, she put on her shoes. Carefully, she straightened up and opened the door. As she stepped in, she stepped down hard to make the broken heel collapse the rest of the way.

With a little squeal, she grabbed for the table by the door to steady herself. At the sound, Dan turned and walked over to her to see if she was all right.

"What happened? Are you okay?"

"Yes," Jenny answered as she bent down to take off the shoe to examine it in front of Dan. "Look, I've broken the heel. Damn. I don't think I have any others that match. I'll have to go back to change my shoes. Tell everyone I'll be back in a minute. If they want to go on ahead, tell them we'll meet them there. Give me a few. I might have to change my outfit." She turned to leave, but Dan caught her arm.

"Don't you dare change. You look too good. Where did you get that outfit? It fits you like a glove, a very silky one." He let his eyes roam over her, and she could feel the heat rising. Not wanting to be distracted, she gently pulled her arm away and leaned up to give him a swift kiss and then turned, promising to be back in about ten minutes.

* * * *

Dan shook his head as he watched her go. Women, why did everything have to match? She looked too good for anyone to be looking at what shoes she was wearing. *Was there a look in your eye?* He sighed. He had to be mistaken. *I'll ask her when she gets back.*

Then he heard the two new lovebirds outside the door arguing, and he smiled as he listened, not caring that he was eavesdropping. Jimmy and Candace seemed to get along like oil and water. Their words seemed to flow back and forth until Dan lost interest and put his focus on the newspaper he was trying to read. He didn't notice when they became quiet.

* * * *

Jenny ran back to her room, going through the side door to get in. She ran to the closet and found some low slip-ons that would be comfortable for the walk to the hotel. It was only a couple of blocks from the bed-and-breakfast, but she wanted to get there as soon as possible. She had already used up about ten minutes of the allotted half hour.

She dropped the note in the middle of the bed for Dan to find when he came to investigate. She locked the door that led to the hall and ran out the back door. She figured that she had followed instructions. She hadn't told Dan anything, but she wanted him to at least have an idea of where to start looking when he discovered she was gone.

* * * *

"Look, sister, I don't need a babysitter every minute. You know you're just here to help Dan. They know *I* haven't done anything." Jimmy's voice came out simmering.

"Nevertheless, I have been told to keep my eye on you, and that is what I'm going to do. If you don't like it, oh well." Candace had butterflies in her stomach. She'd never met anyone whom she instantly felt antagonistic toward plus the attraction she felt had hit her in the solar plexus the minute she had been introduced to her new assignment. *Damn, don't let him get under your skin, Candace*.

"What the…" Jimmy began, only to stop, and start walking in the direction he had been looking.

Candace turned to see what he was looking at; she saw Jenny hurrying down the alley behind the houses. She was walking with determination. Without another thought, Candace automatically checked her purse to make sure her police issue was in it, then followed Jimmy. As if by silent agreement, they stayed back far enough not to alert Jenny to their presence. After several minutes, they could see a large, imposing hotel, and Candace motioned Jimmy to stop.

"Looks like Jenny is headed to the Peabody. We need to call for backup," Candace whispered to Jimmy. "Keep an eye on her. I'm going to walk out of sight and try Dan."

* * * *

Dan finally put the newspaper down, realizing it had been longer than ten minutes. Jimmy and Candace had left the door a while ago, and the others had all chosen to meet them at B. B. King's. Just as he stood to go in search of Jenny, his cell phone rang. Pulling it out of his pocket, he frowned when he saw the number. It was Candace.

"Yes," he answered briskly, knowing it couldn't be good, or she wouldn't be calling him.

"Jenny is on her way to the Peabody Hotel. We've been following her. She looks like she's in a hurry. Did she tell you where she was going?"

"What?" Dan stepped out to look in the direction of Jenny's room. "She said she was changing. I'll go check her room. Keep an eye on her. I'll call you back in a minute. Keep it on vibrate." Dan winced when he gave the last instruction; she'd have already thought of that. Oh well, he couldn't worry about feelings now.

His room was next to Jenny's, so he had automatically gone through the house to the hall door. He tried the door; it was locked. He had to walk around to check the outside door. The door stood ajar. Walking in, he noticed the flowers and wondered for a moment who had sent them, and then he spotted the note. Picking it up with dread, he read it.

"Fuck!" he all but shouted to the empty room, shoving the note in his pocket while not worrying about fingerprints. There wouldn't be any, just like the previous ones. He put the phone to his ear and punched the button to return the last received call as he headed out the door to follow the others.

"There's a note. Runner has her mother somewhere. You two stay as close as possible without being seen," Dan instructed. "And be careful. I don't want anyone hurt. I'll contact the local police." He disconnected, and then he dialed the captain's number and briefly filled him in.

Then he called Officer Louis LeBlanc, the contact the captain had given him at the station. Officer O'Riley was in the man's office when Dan's call came through. Both of the officers agreed to meet Dan near the entrance to Peabody Place; from there they could follow on to the hotel. It was past the time the tourists all gathered to watch the famous evening duck march from the fountain, so the lobby should be relatively quiet.

* * * *

"Come on. Dan's sending back up. I promised we wouldn't lose Jenny." Candace filled Jimmy in as they walked. They had been walking close enough to occasionally brush arms, so when Jimmy fell, she immediately turned to see what happened. She felt as though her head exploded, and she caught a glimpse of a man in overalls, bending as he laid Jimmy on the sidewalk.

* * * *

Dan turned the corner, and the hotel came into sight. His insides were churning. He was afraid he'd be too late. Why hadn't she told him? She must have gotten the note before she came and told him about the shoe. Thinking back, he thought that the shoe had broken too easily. Now he knew why, and he knew what that look in her eye had been. She had been nervous. At least she had thought to leave the note where he would find it and know where to start looking.

His train of thought was interrupted as he saw two bodies ahead on the sidewalk. As he got closer, he realized it was Jimmy and Candace. Dan covered the distance in record time, then knelt down to check them out. *Thank God, they're still alive.* Glancing around, he pulled out his phone to call Detective LeBlanc and filled him in on what he'd found. The detective told him he was almost at their meeting place. He promised to call for an ambulance as soon as he got off the phone. Dan was torn between waiting for the ambulance and continuing after Jenny. The pull of his love made his decision for him.

He took off his jacket to lay it over Candace and silently apologized to Jimmy for not having anything for him. Straightening, he looked around the neighborhood for someone to stay with the two, but there was no one in sight. Without further delay, he continued toward the hotel, having decided not to wait at the shopping center as planned. He knew within his gut that he was already too late.

* * * *

Jenny was so worried, she never had a clue she was being followed. She had one goal, and that was to get to the hotel lobby and plead for her mother's life. *Hang on, Collette. We may have our problems, but I'm going to get us out of this mess. I'm not sure how, but I will.* After what seemed like hours, she finally reached the hotel. Looking around, she didn't see anyone, so she entered into the lobby as instructed. Still not seeing anyone, as casually as she could, she walked around the fountain. Then when she had almost given up, a tall, strange man stepped out, seemingly from nowhere.

"Ms. McGregor, please come with me, and don't make a scene. I will take you to your mother." He was dressed in shabby overalls covered in grease, as if he'd been working on a car engine. His hair was long and unkempt, and he had a scruffy beard. His cultured speech was at odds with his appearance.

Without hesitation, she went with him. He led her to the parking garage and toward a black car with tinted windows. She tried to look in to see if someone else was in the car, but the windows were too dark. It didn't matter because the man opened the door for her, and she climbed in the back. Inside, on the backseat on the opposite side of the car, sat a person. In the dark of the car, Jenny couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman.

After settling into her seat, the big man climbed in the front with the driver, and they took off. No one said anything as they sped along the streets of Memphis. Jenny could barely see out of the windows, but it looked like they were going to section of town full of warehouses. She could only see the outlines of large buildings, so she couldn't be sure. She turned to look at the person beside her. He or she had on black pants, black boots, and a hooded sweatshirt with the hood pulled up over his or her head. The person was facing the window as if intent on their destination. Looking at the person's hands, Jenny could find no clues there either. There were no adornments, and they were not small, but they were not large either. There wasn't even a hint of perfume or aftershave to give a clue. Jenny had no doubt this was the person who called himself Runner.

"What do you want? Why do you have my mother?" Jenny asked. But there was no response. She might as well have been talking to herself.

* * * *

Dan searched every inch of the lobby and surrounding areas with a sinking feeling. There were no witnesses to see what had happened—the lobby was empty. The police had arrived several minutes earlier and helped search, which only took a few minutes since the lobby had been deserted. The ambulance had taken the other two to the hospital, but neither one had regained consciousness.

Dan called a halt and told everyone it was time to set up a command post and start working on the clues and searching other areas where she could have been taken. One of the coaches would be the command center. Since Dan didn't have jurisdiction, they would have the coach outside of the police station. Officer LeBlanc would officially man the search, but Dan would coordinate his search from the command post. On the way to meet Jason at the station where he would be bringing the coach, Dan called Marty, who was still at B. B. King's with the others.

"Marty, I'm sorry we're not there yet. I have some bad news." Dan paused a minute to let his words sink in. When he heard Marty's soft gasp, he continued. "Jenny received another note from Runner. He has her mother, Collette."

"What? In San Diego?" Marty shouted in Dan's ear, and he winced.

"Collette arrived in Memphis this morning," Dan began. Officer O'Riley had filled him in on what had happened at the airport that morning. "At the airport they were met by someone saying he was there to meet Collette. While Officer O'Riley went to get bags, Collette went to the ladies' room. When she came out, someone snagged her. The bastard sent a note to Jenny and threatened Collette's life if she told anyone. She followed his instructions and went to the Peabody Hotel lobby. We're setting up a command center in one of the coaches at the police station. Bring the others, and meet me there, and I'll fill you in on the rest. I'm going to enlist everyone's help searching." After a few other comments and instructions, Dan disconnected just as he pulled into the lot at the station.

Chapter Seventeen

"That pretty much brings all of you up to date on the events of this afternoon. So now we have Collette and Jenny missing." They were gathered in the small living room area of the motor coach. Dan had hung a map of the area over the large window by the table. He was dividing the area and assigning everyone in groups of two. Bonnie, Jimmy, and Candace were the only ones not present. Everyone had been told that Grogen, their new drummer, was none other than Jimmy, which brought a sigh of relief from everyone. All were concerned when they learned he was in the hospital, still unconscious from a blow to the head.

Breaking into their conversation, the sound of Dan's cell phone rang out. Pulling it out of his pocket, he frowned at the screen, which said it was a private number. Raising his hand for quiet, he answered the phone.

"Hello."

"I just called B. B. King's to wish Jenny a happy birthday and see if the party was going well. They said there was an emergency and the whole group left in a hurry. What's going on?"

"I'm sorry you had to find out this way, Bonnie, but Jenny is missing," Dan said.

"I thought you were watching her."

Dan could hear the disgust in Bonnie's voice.

"She got another note from Runner telling her he had her mother."

"Her mother, Collette? In Memphis?" Bonnie shot the rapid questions at him.

"Apparently she had a call from someone telling her the band wanted her at Jenny's party tonight as a surprise, so she flew out. She was taken at the airport." Looking around at the expectant faces, who couldn't hear Bonnie's side, he shook his head to signal he would fill them in when he was through.

"I can't believe the good mayor would let Collette come alone." Bonnie was nearly shouting. He thought that if she got any louder, the others would hear.

"She had someone with her, but it's a long story, and we really need to get searching."

"I'll be back in the morning. We've just arrived here, so it really is pointless to just turn around, so I'll be there about seven or eight," Bonnie promised.

"All right, we need all the help we can get. Try and think of anything that you may have noticed before you left the bed-and-breakfast today. Thanks, Bonnie." Dan disconnected and filled the others in.

"Is she coming back to Memphis?" Doug asked.

"Yes, in the morning," Dan informed the group, then steered everyone's attention back to the map they had been studying before the interruption.

Dan's frustration grew when not two minutes later there was a knock on the door and Officer LeBlanc entered the coach. The officer filled the leftover space with his presence. He was a big man and had to stoop a little because of his height. He looked around at all the faces, and Dan knew he was resigning himself to civilians on the search.

"I see you have everything set up. Have you heard anything from Runner?" Officer LeBlanc asked.

"No, but I hadn't expected to. He wants Jenny to himself. He's not going to be holding her for ransom. I've looked over all of the notes, and my gut tells me he is taking her to the secret hideaway he briefly referred to."

"I didn't see anything in the notes about that."

"He came to the captain's house and snuck up in some bushes where Jenny was standing and threatened her not to speak. You know the scenario. Anyway, he referred to a place he would be taking her. He said, 'A paradise for just the two of us.'"

"Actually that buys us time. I'm still concerned for her mother. I've got officers combing the warehouse district, especially vacant ones. I think that's the most likely place to find her. I just hope we aren't too late." At Officer LeBlanc's words, a shiver ran down Dan's spine.

"Officer, you don't think he intends to kill Collette, do you? After all, it was just a ruse to get Jenny alone," Marla asked fearfully.

"Depends on if Collette can identify him. If she saw him, he's not going

to leave her to blow the whistle." Officer LeBlanc stopped and turned at the gasp from the doorway. No one had heard the door open; Mayor Farrell stood listening to the conversation. Officer LeBlanc looked at the newcomer questioningly.

"Officer LeBlanc, this is Mayor Theodore Farrell, Collette's fiancé." Dan introduced the two, but Ted wasn't in the mood for pleasantries.

"I take it from what I just heard there has been no word on Collette?"

"I'm sorry, sir. We haven't heard anything from the officers who are searching. Officer LeBlanc has every available man looking through the deserted warehouses. He feels that's where Runner might have taken Collette to lure Jenny away."

"I'm here to help. Tell me what I can do. I can't sit here and wait," Ted said. "I've been a nervous wreck since I got the phone call from Greg. I cut my meeting off and immediately took the earliest flight from San Diego. I'm tired, short-tempered, and I don't want to hear that my soon-to-be wife may not be alive."

Dan thought he knew how the mayor felt. The man had gone through hell for Collette when he campaigned for mayor. The gossip magazines ran her through the mud about her past. It was in the newspapers that he had gone against all of his advisors and kept his relationship with Collette. Even though he had stood firm and declared he would make her his wife, he had won the election.

Then, as if reading Dan's thoughts, Ted announced, "I'm not going to let some two-bit hood with a crush on my soon-to-be stepdaughter take away everything I've worked so hard for."

"Okay, I know that ultimately you're my boss, and I really should try and talk you out of this, for your own safety, if nothing else. I want Jenny back safe as much as you do Collette, so I'm not going to turn down your offer to help." Dan turned back to the map to point out where they were dividing sections. "You can go with Doug to look over this area. Start at Linden Avenue and work your way down South Third Street to East G. E. Patterson Avenue. I'm not familiar with the area, so I don't know if there are any warehouses in that area or not. Just look for anything that might be suspicious. Officer LeBlanc has experienced officers in the warehouse district, so I'm letting them do that area, and we will do everything we can elsewhere."

Doug and Ted turned to leave, but Ted turned back. He had been dropped off by a taxi and asked how they were going to search. Doug informed him that Marty and Paul had rented several cars for the search. All had been provided with detailed maps of the city along with directions on how to navigate through the streets of Memphis. Without further questions, the two left.

"Okay, so you have two down and the rest of us to go. Dan, where do you want us?" Marla asked.

"You are staying here to man the phones and coordinate the search. I want you and Tessa here at all times; we will be calling in to report what we find, and I want you two to mark the map so we're not running around in circles leaving some areas uncovered and others over covered." Dan paused and waited for their protest, but to his amazement, the two women accepted this responsibility. He heaved a sigh of relief. He hadn't wanted the added worry of the two of them out in danger. He saw a look of relief on Rich's face that his wife would be at the command post in relative safety.

"Good, I'm glad you two agree. Larry and Rich, I want you in this area." Dan pointed to a spot on the map, and the two noted the area and left. Dan looked to Officer LeBlanc, and it was decided the two of them would pair off. Looking over the area, Dan gave areas to the four drivers and Marty and Paul, who insisted they not be left out of the search effort. With only the two women left, and himself and Officer LeBlanc, Dan gave a few last-minute instructions to Marla and Tessa and prepared to leave. Before they were able to make it out of the door, Officer LeBlanc's cell phone rang.

"LeBlanc." He listened to the person on the other end, and then, without further conversation on his end, disconnected. He turned to the others and gave the good news. Jimmy and Candace had both regained consciousness, and although both had bad headaches, they would be good as new by morning.

"Let's swing by the hospital and see if they have anything that will help us before we head out to search," Dan said.

"I'm with you there. Maybe they got a description that will help us know who to look for."

* * * *

The car stopped, and Jenny tried the door but found it locked, and although she was on the inside, she could not find a way to unlock it. She hadn't needed to worry. The man who had led her to the car was opening the door before she could panic.

"Ms. McGregor, please come this way, and I will take you to your mother." He leaned slightly and took her arm to help her out of the car.

Jenny gave no resistance, but when she tried to turn to see if the mysterious person in the car was following, the man holding her arm positioned himself so she couldn't see behind her. She looked around the area and was not comforted by the sight. It seemed to be a deserted area with no street lamps and was filled with short buildings that looked like deserted warehouses. She had been correct when she thought they were traveling in an industrial area.

They entered one of the buildings. The lights were dim, which made it hard to see. When the man let go of her arm to enter the doorway, it was replaced by someone else's hand. Jenny tried to turn to see who had her, but the hand on her arm tightened in warning. Not wanting to anger the person and endanger her mother further, Jenny complied and turned back to face the long hallway. There were doors lining both sides of the hall. She was led along until they stopped at the end of the hall.

With an arm placed around her firmly holding both arms in place, Jenny felt Runner nod to the man standing on her right. The man reached in front of Jenny and turned the knob. After that, the events seemed to happen in a split second. Jenny saw her mother bound to a chair.

* * * *

Collette lost track of time after Runner had left earlier in the day. Actually, Collette didn't know if it was day or night. The warehouse had no windows, and the one or two light bulbs had been burning since she had awoken earlier. It was dim at best, as the bulbs didn't give off much light in the large room. She had just been starting to nod off when the door flew open. The joy of seeing Jenny was quickly replaced by horror as she watched the gun being raised in slow motion. Without thinking further, she threw her weight to the side. Pain shot up her shoulder as it hit with full force on the cement floor, then was replaced by the sharp pain as her head

met with the same fate. Then the world, for the second time that day, went black.

* * * *

Jenny saw her mother at the same time as she saw the gun out of the corner of her eye. Turning her head slightly, she saw the gun jerk as it was fired. Turning back, she saw her mother falling over. She screamed at the sight, and the world blessedly receded into oblivion.

* * * *

Dan and Officer LeBlanc sat in the hospital room with Jimmy and Candace. They were staying in the same room for security purposes, with an officer outside of the room who would stay until the two were released.

"Can you tell me who hit you, Jimmy?" Dan asked. He had his pencil ready to take any notes that might help.

"No. One minute, we were headed toward the hotel, and the next thing, I know there was a sharp pain in my head, and the world kinda tilted. I saw the sky, and I remember thinking how blue the sky was. That was the last thing I remember. I know it sounds dumb to think of the sky like that, but that's what I did."

"Okay, well how about you, Candace? Did you see anything?"

"We were walking, and I could feel Jimmy's arm brushing mine one minute, and then it was gone, and I turned to see why he had stopped and caught a glimpse of a man laying him on the sidewalk. Before I could even take a step forward, someone must have hit me from behind. It felt like my head just exploded, and everything went black. I didn't even have time to think anything."

"What did the man look like?" Dan asked anxiously. *Good, finally something or someone I can look for.*

"He was dressed in overalls. It looked like he had just come from working on a car. They were covered in grease. He had straggly brown hair and a beard. I think he was tall, but I couldn't really tell the way he was bending. That's all I remember. It happened so fast. I didn't really get a look at his face since he was looking down. I'm sorry. I'm usually better at

descriptions than that." Candace sighed. "I know it's not much. Without a description of the face, my description could be a million different men."

"It gives us something to go on. I don't think the man you described is Runner, just one of his minions. If either of you remember anything, no matter how small, call me." Dan told them to rest, and he would let them know if they found anything.

Dan and Officer LeBlanc were on their way to the industrial district when the call came. One of the team of officers found Collette in a deserted warehouse. The dispatcher told Officer LeBlanc that the officer on scene had called an ambulance and they would be there in minutes. Luckily, they were only a few streets away from where Collette was found. Dan feared the worst since dispatch hadn't stated Collette's condition when he called. Dan decided to wait until they got to the scene and he knew more before making the call to Ted, Collette's fiancé.

Officers had gathered at the entrance of the room. The crime scene had been kept as clean as possible. The ambulance had yet to arrive. Dan shouldered his way through the officers at the door and made his way to Collette. The bindings had been removed, and she had been laid on the cement. Someone had covered her with his jacket. She was so still Dan was worried she was dead, and then he saw the slight rise of her chest.

"Has anyone other than the two of you been in here?" Dan demanded. There was a lot of blood around her head. It didn't look good, but at least her breathing seemed to be steady and strong.

"No, and we haven't touched anything other than the victim."

"Good, keep everyone out. When the ambulance gets here, let only two in to get her on the gurney and take her out. They can stabilize her once they get her out of this room. I don't want the area contaminated any more than it already is." Dan straightened as he stopped giving orders, realizing he had overstepped his bounds. This was Officer LeBlanc's territory, not his. But when he looked over, LeBlanc seemed to be content to let Dan take charge.

"Sir, the ambulance is here, and they want to examine her before they move her. They say it's standard procedure."

"Okay, keep the gurney in the hall and let one paramedic in to examine her. Then one can bring the gurney in when Collette's ready to be moved." Dan stood watching as the young woman rushed in to examine Collette.

The paramedic leaning over Collette took all of her vitals and gently

moved her head to check the wound. When she was through, she turned to the door and motioned for the other paramedic, a tall, thin man, more boy than man, to bring the gurney in. Then she turned to Dan and LeBlanc to give her diagnosis.

"Sir, she seems to be stable, but she's lost a lot of blood. We need to get her to the hospital as quickly as possible. Do you know the next of kin so we can get vital information that might save her life?" she asked Dan.

"Go ahead and take her to the hospital. I'll have her fiancé, Mayor Farrell, meet you there. He can give you any information you need."

"Thank you. We'll get her there and do what we can. If she's strong, I think she'll pull through, but only time will tell."

Dan watched the two of them lift Collette onto the gurney and take her out to the ambulance. He couldn't put it off any longer. He needed to make the call to Ted and let him know about Collette. He was glad he had waited so he could let him know that she was stable.

After giving Ted directions to the hospital so he could meet the ambulance with Collette, Dan and Officer LeBlanc left the warehouse in the capable hands of the Memphis forensic team. They headed back to the command center to look over the map of the area to plan their next course of action. Collette was unconscious and couldn't tell them if she had seen Jenny or if she knew the identity of Runner. Dan had never been on a more frustrating case. It was as if they had no clues, and whenever they seemed to have one, it led to a dead end.

When they got back to the station, Officer LeBlanc told Dan he wanted to go to his office to check his messages and would meet Dan at the coach in about ten minutes. Dan watched him walk in the direction of the station for a moment, then turned and continued toward the makeshift command center.

He had an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach. He had ignored the unspoken code of an officer and had fallen in love with his charge. He had been assigned to protect Jenny, and he couldn't help but feel he had let his guard down. He'd let the unthinkable happen. If he hadn't been blinded by his love, he would have been guarding her door twenty-four–seven instead of sharing her bed and then blissfully reading the paper in the breakfast room while she took off alone to find her mother.

Walking into the coach, Dan found Tessa and Marla marking the map where Collette had been found. Both turned anxiously as Dan entered. With

a shake of his head, he conveyed that he had no news of Jenny. With sagging shoulders, Dan took a seat on the one chair behind the cab of the coach.

* * * *

Marla took one look at Dan's tired face and offered him a cup of freshly brewed coffee. Tessa had kept a pot going all night for the searchers who'd been in and out of the coach. As she handed him a cup, she placed her hand on his shoulder and gave him a gentle squeeze of encouragement. She felt the danger Jenny was in—it felt like a solid rock burning in the pit of her stomach—but she still had hopes that they would find Jenny before it was too late.

"Have either of you heard from the hospital yet about Collette's condition?" Dan asked.

"Ted just called. When he arrived, she was in the emergency room, and the doctor told Ted the head wound was serious," Marla informed him. "She had a concussion, but they were waiting for the X-rays to see if there are any fractures. She's unconscious, and with the loss of blood and head wound, the doctor didn't think she would wake up tonight. The doctor told Ted he was concerned because the length of unconsciousness may relate to the severity of the concussion. Often people have no memory of events preceding the injury or immediately after regaining consciousness. Ted said to warn you that Collette may not be much help." Marla watched as Dan let his head fall back against the back of the chair. She knew that he'd been holding on to the hope Collette would be able to identify Runner.

"Damn," Dan muttered with his eyes closed. "How are we going to find Jenny in a city the size of Memphis?"

* * * *

Officer LeBlanc walked into the coach and immediately felt the air of disappointment. It was so thick he could almost taste it. At his questioning look, Marla filled him in on the call they had received from the mayor. But he wasn't as discouraged as the rest of them.

"Dan, I think I have some news you might want to hear," Officer

LeBlanc stated.

Dan straightened in his chair to listen to what Officer LeBlanc had to say. “Good, I could use something to go on because I’m at a loss. I have only myself to blame. When this is over, I think maybe I’ll see about becoming a desk jockey, although doing paper work is something I swore I’d never do.”

LeBlanc raised an eyebrow at him. “Feeling sorry for yourself isn’t going to help Jenny. Anyway, if you’re done, I’ll tell you the news.” He waited and continued when Dan motioned for him to continue with a contrite look. “I received a call from a former officer named Delaney who retired a few years back. He claims he might have some information that might help us. He wouldn’t tell me over the phone, but said he would be here in the morning about eight.

“He has a file that he wants you to look at. He moved up Nashville way right after he retired. He said he just heard about Jenny’s disappearance on the late news. Must be something concrete since that’s over a three-hour drive from here. He’ll have to get up before dawn to make it here to miss the rush-hour traffic.”

“Well why the hell doesn’t he fax the information or tell you what it is over the phone? We’re wasting valuable time,” Dan said in frustration.

“He said he wasn’t one hundred percent sure. The last time he faxed information to someone, it got into the wrong hands. He wasn’t about to take any chances. He refused to say more, said he wanted to make sure this time nothing went wrong.”

“I won’t let anything go wrong.” Dan took a hasty gulp from his cup. “I’ll be here to meet him then. Now as soon as I finish this coffee, I’ll be ready to go out and search some more. Where do you suggest I start?” Dan stood quickly as if he didn’t want to wait another minute.

“I suggest you and the others go to bed and rest so you are refreshed in the morning. When Officer Delaney gets here, we may have more to go on, and you should be fresh and ready to go.” LeBlanc only smiled at Dan and pushed him back into the chair when he tried to get up.

“I’m not going to sit here doing nothing while Jenny’s out there alone and afraid.”

“You’ve lost your objectivity. Think. You’re not helping if you collapse from exhaustion. I have my night officers searching. They’re fresh, and they

have the description of both Jenny and the man that Candace saw. You and the others meet me here at eight in the morning." LeBlanc didn't wait for further arguments. He walked out with a slight bang of the door.

* * * *

Dan sat watching the door for a few more minutes. Before he could turn away, it opened, and Larry and the others who had been out searching filed in. They all looked wrung out and exhausted. LeBlanc was right. What good were they in this condition? Dan told everyone he would be crashing in Jenny's room in the coach in case anything happened during the night. He told the others to go back to the bed-and-breakfast and come back in the morning at eight. Only token resistance met his suggestion, indicating they felt as tired as they looked. Dan agreed he would contact them if anything happened during the night.

Chapter Eighteen

Jenny was lying still. She hadn't opened her eyes yet, but she could feel the water enveloping her body. For a moment, she savored the sensation of calm, warm water; deep in her subconscious she knew when she opened her eyes she wouldn't like what her reality had become. Then slowly, by degrees, memories began to surface: heading toward the hotel, getting in the car with the strange man, then last but most disturbing, the moment when the gun fired and she turned to see her mother fall to the cement floor.

As she sat up with a gasp, water splashed over the edge of the tub she was in. Gulping in air, she looked around the room. Instinctively, she brought her arms up to cover her breasts. It wasn't a room, but a wooden shack, and for the moment, she was alone and naked sitting in an old brass tub. She closed her eyes again and tried to concentrate, to remember what had happened after her mother was shot.

Now that Collette was dead, she could only think of her as her mother. *Funny how the mind works.* Then she put her arms down along the sides of the tub and, laying her head back as she did, let the tears roll down her cheeks. She began to shiver at the thought of the madman who had undressed her and placed her in the tub. She noticed there was no evidence of her clothes. She was truly at his mercy.

Suddenly, she heard the door opening, and she turned to see the strange man enter, the one who put her in the car at the hotel. Jenny hastily pulled her arms back up to shield herself from his eyes. But he didn't seem to notice or care. She twisted her head to watch as he walked behind the tub. She saw he had some clothes and a towel in his hands, and he proceeded to lay them on a bench Jenny hadn't noticed earlier, probably because she had to twist her whole body to look behind her to see it.

"What is going on? Where are my clothes?" Jenny demanded. But he ignored her, and without looking at her, he left the shack the way he had

entered.

Silently.

Well, fine. She wasn't going to sit in the tub naked and vulnerable a moment more. The man left some clothes. They weren't hers, but she would make do. She climbed out of the tub and reached for the towel folded neatly on the bench. She picked it up and used it to dry off until it was damp. She placed it beside the clothes on the bench and began to dress.

Everything down to the lacy underwear seemed to have been chosen for her. They fit to perfection. There was a small mirror hanging on one of the walls where Jenny could see a partial image of herself. She shivered at the sight. Whoever picked out the clothes had done so deliberately.

The bra and panties were matching slips of black lace, made to entice. The white silk blouse felt soft and feminine next to her skin, the style elegant in its simplicity. The pants were made of a black suede material that fit like a glove. Soft black leather boots were provided for her feet with knee-length hose to wear underneath. Jenny looked at herself. Runner had excellent taste in clothes. She looked all female, from the inside out. Any man would find her desirable in the ensemble she was dressed in, right down to the lacy lingerie.

Wondering at the freedom she had been granted, Jenny decided to take a look around. She went to the door and, trying the knob, smiled with derision when she realized that it was locked. *Well, what did you expect?* Looking around, she noticed there were no windows. She had no idea if it was day or night, or if they were still in the city. The only light came from a bare dim bulb hanging from a loose wire over her head. *As long as the lights on, at least I won't be completely in the dark.* Then the bulb started to flicker, and she held her breath, but after a moment the flickering stopped, and she sighed in relief.

The only place to sit was the bench where the clothes were placed, so she walked over to the bench to sit and wait. After a few minutes, she could no longer stand to just sit docilely and wait for her captor. She stood and started to prowl around the shack, looking for any weapon she could find.

There was nothing but the tub, bench, and towel. The room was completely bare. Wondering how long she would have to wait, she plopped onto the bench in defeat. Then the chills set in again as she imagined unknown hands carefully undressing her and laying her naked in a tub of

warm water.

* * * *

Dan instantly awoke at the sound of his cell ringing, and glancing at the illuminated face of the clock, he noted it was just a little past four in the morning as he picked up the phone.

"Janson," Dan answered.

"Dan, this is Ted. Collette just woke up. She's a little groggy, but they say she will make a full recovery."

"I'll be there in a minute," Dan said and then hung up before Ted could protest.

Fifteen minutes later, Dan was walking into the quiet hospital. None of the staff stopped him. He had a look of authority and purpose, and none dared to question what he was doing at that time of the night visiting a patient. After requesting the room number from a nurse at the only desk he could find manned, he quickly found Collette's room. As he walked through the door, Ted had been waiting for him and tried to block his way to the bed and patient.

"Hold on, Dan. Collette's been through enough. She needs her rest. Give her some time to rest before you question her." Ted tried unsuccessfully to stop Dan, but Dan kept walking toward the bed.

Looking down at Collette, Dan could tell that she had gone back to sleep. Scowling across at Ted, he asked, "Did you ask her who did this?"

"No. I didn't want to upset her. She seemed disoriented, so I did what the doctor told me to do and encouraged her to go back to sleep to rest," Ted answered defensively.

"Damn it, you know she could be able to help us with a description. Do you think she'd want to hold back where Jenny is concerned?"

"No, I'm sure she wouldn't. It's the middle of the night. The doctor said there'd be a good chance she won't remember. Please wait until morning. Give her that much time," Ted pleaded.

Dan ran a hand through his hair, then sighed. "I won't wake her, but I'm staying. At the first signs she's waking up, I'm not waiting another moment longer to question her." Dan looked around the room and saw a chair in the corner and marched toward it. He settled his bulk into the small chair. The

only other chair in the room was a chaise lounge Ted had been using.

"What did she say when she woke up to make you think she was disoriented?" Dan finally asked after Ted had walked to his chair and shifted around until he must have been comfortable and then turned his attention to Collette.

"She didn't seem to remember what had happened. In fact, she didn't understand she wasn't home in her own bed. She had just looked at me and said, 'I'm still a little tired, Ted. I think I'll sleep in this morning. Why don't you go on into the office, and I'll call you a little later?' With that, she'd rolled to her side and went back to sleep. Maybe in the morning the confusion will be gone, and she can lead you in the right direction."

Dan nodded. He turned his attention to Collette and sat willing her to wake up. He was having a horrible time keeping to his word and waiting. If he had been in a more comfortable chair, he might have dozed a little and made the waiting less stressful, but the chair was small and uncomfortable, and the hours seemed to drag. Finally, around seven in the morning, Collette began to wake up. Dan and Ted immediately stood and went to her side.

* * * *

"Good morning, honey, how do you feel?" Ted asked when she opened her eyes.

Collette looked at Ted and started to smile, but then she sensed someone else in the bedroom. That didn't make sense. She turned her head slightly and saw an unfamiliar man standing by the other side of the bed. Then she looked down at the side rails of the bed and wondered where they came from. Turning her head more, she tried to sit up and look around, but her head ached, and it seemed that she couldn't seem to make her body move.

"Whoa, if you want to sit up, honey, tell me, and I'll raise the bed a little."

"Ted, we can't raise our bed, and why are there rails on our bed? What's this man doing in our room? What's going on?" Collette didn't pause in her questions, just rattled them off one after the other.

"You're not home, Collette. Don't you remember what happened?" Ted asked.

Collette watched as Ted looked across the bed at the man and seemed to

plead with his eyes. He must have understood what Ted meant because he gave a slight nod of understanding.

"No," Collette said, then looked around again and realized that she was in a hospital room. She sat quietly thinking for a moment, and as she sat, she closed her eyes and tried to remember the day before. She remembered sitting at breakfast with Ted and asking him something. He didn't want her to do it. She couldn't quite remember what they had been talking about.

She squeezed her eyes shut tighter and concentrated. It started to come back. There had been a phone call from someone. *Come on, Collette, think. What was it about?* It had been from a stage tech about Jenny's birthday, and the memory came flooding back. She had flown to Memphis to go to Jenny's birthday party, but when she got to the airport, someone hit her over the head when she came out of the ladies' restroom.

"You were right. I should have waited for you," she said to Ted.

"What do you remember?" The man finally broke his silence.

Collette looked to Ted in question. She wasn't going to tell anything to this man until she knew who he was.

"Honey, this is Detective Dan Janson. Captain Martin assigned him to go on tour with Jenny, remember?"

"Oh, okay, I'll tell you what I remember," she said, then wiggled a little in the bed to get comfortable. "There was a young man at the airport to greet Officer O'Riley and me when we got off the plane. I told them I needed to go powder my nose, and I told Officer O'Riley to go get my bags. Then I remember coming out of the ladies' room and thinking that I forgot to ask where to meet them, Officer O'Riley and the boy. And then I felt a pain in the back of my head, and the room started to tilt. I remember thinking to myself that I should have listened to Ted." Collette looked at Ted in apology.

"Do you remember where they took you?" Dan asked, bringing her attention back to him.

"What do you mean? Didn't they bring me here to the hospital after that?" Collette asked, looking back and forth at Ted and Dan. At their frowns, her stomach started to churn. Was there more she didn't remember? Her question was answered by Ted.

"Honey, are you sure you don't remember anything before waking up just now?"

"I remember I told you I was too tired and I wanted to go back to sleep. Wait, that doesn't make sense." Collette shook her head to clear her memory, only to stop when a sharp pain shot up the side of her head. Wincing, she put a hand to her head.

"Yes, honey, that happened. You woke up in the night and said that to me. You were a little disoriented." Ted reached over and placed a tender hand on her head.

"That's all you remember?" Dan asked again in a disappointed voice.

"Yes. I'm sorry I don't remember anything else. Do you need me to try?" She sensed that there was something they were not telling her, and she didn't think she would like it when she found out.

"No, until you're ready to remember, it won't do any good for you to try and force it." Dan turned to Ted and stated, "I'm going to head back to the command post. If there's any change, call me. Before I leave the hospital, I think I'll go check on Jimmy and Candace and see if they're ready to leave."

"Ted, what aren't you telling me?" Collette brought his attention back, but before he had a chance to answer her question, the doctor walked in to check on the patient.

* * * *

Dan nodded to the doctor. As he left the room, he could hear Collette question the doctor and Ted. He continued to Jimmy and Candace's room, where he found them up and getting ready to leave.

"Looks like you two aren't any the worse for wear after your adventure." At Dan's words, both stopped and turned.

"Any news?" Jimmy asked.

"We found Collette. She had a nasty gash in her head but seems she'll recover. Unfortunately, she doesn't remember anything past the airport."

"We heard she was brought in unconscious last night, but we didn't hear anything further. We were just getting ready to call someone to pick us up to take us to the command post so we could help," Candace informed Dan.

"I don't know how much you two will be able to help if you collapse. I think you might want to go get some more rest."

"No." they replied at the same time.

"Whoa, fine, don't say I didn't warn you. Well, hurry up. I'll go round

up the doctor to get your release ready. I need to get back to meet with a retired officer driving down from Nashville."

"What does he have to do with this?" Candace asked.

"I'll explain on the way. Let me get the doctor," Dan answered and left the room before either of them could detain him any longer. He found the doctor at the desk and found out he was already working on their release. Within ten minutes, the three were walking to Dan's rental car. Once they were on their way, Dan explained what Officer LeBlanc had told him about Officer Delaney. Pulling up into the station's parking lot, Dan noticed a strange car and assumed that the retired officer would be inside.

Opening the door to the coach, Dan frowned in disappointment when he realized that the car belonged to Bonnie. She turned at Dan's entrance and saw his frown.

"What's wrong?" Bonnie stared as Jimmy entered the coach. "What are you doing here?"

"It's a long story that's going to have to wait until after we find Jenny," Dan said. "I saw the car outside and thought it was for someone else. Glad you could come back, Bon, sorry it's under these circumstances. Looks like the others haven't arrived back yet this morning. Bonnie, why don't you go round up Doug, and the two of you can start your search over here." Dan walked to the map and pointed out an area not far from the bed-and-breakfast. He figured that way they wouldn't need to come all the way back to the station. "Just give us a call from time to time and let us know your progress. Tessa and Marla are manning the phones. Here are the cell numbers you'll need." Dan jotted down the two numbers on a scrap of paper and handed it to Bonnie.

"Dan, don't worry. We'll find Jenny. I don't think this guy is going to hurt her. Please keep that in mind." Bonnie leaned over and gave Dan a swift kiss on the cheek as she left the coach.

Dan turned to watch her leave. He hadn't always liked Bonnie, but she was a good friend of Jenny's, and he was glad she had come back to help in the search.

Turning to Jimmy and Candace, he explained how the search areas and command post worked. Within a few minutes, he had given the two their assignments and sent them on their way.

Not long after, Dan heard a car drive up, and seconds later there was a

knock on the coach door. Dan stood and opened the door to a tall, gray-haired gentleman. The man came in and looked around at the makeshift command center, and as if giving his approval, he nodded and turned to Dan and introduced himself.

"I'm retired Officer Delaney, and you must be Detective Janson?" The man reached out a hand to shake.

"Yes, I am. I really appreciate you driving all this way to help. Officer LeBlanc said you may have something to help us?" Dan didn't really want to waste time on pleasantries. Since none of the others had arrived yet, it would be the perfect time to go over whatever Officer Delaney had, in relative privacy.

"I've brought a case file that I worked on for years before I retired. I'm not going to go over it with you until you have read it. See if you come to the same conclusion that I have." Officer Delaney handed the file over to Dan, looking around while Dan read silently. Without asking, he stood up and helped himself to a cup of coffee.

Dan read over the file, then sat and wondered if he had read it right. Before letting himself get off on the wrong track, he carefully read the file again. Then he was certain; the file had to be on the same person who had taken Jenny. The file was dated about ten years prior, when a young high school girl had vanished. Her friends said she had been getting notes from a secret admirer and had been excited. Then one day she never came home. The notes were found in her bedroom, all of which were in her file.

Dan looked up from one of the notes. Holding the plastic bag that held it, he caught Officer Delaney's eyes watching him with careful intensity. "This note says almost exactly what one of Jenny's said. Here, let me get the file." Dan stood, carefully laying the file and note on the table before going into Jenny's room to retrieve her file.

Coming back, he laid the file next to the other. Then he rifled through it to find the note he had remembered. Once he found the paper, he laid it next to the other so the two of them could compare. The two men stood over the table looking at the notes in silence. The content of the note was almost identical. The writing looked very similar. It looked to be a young hand, which made Dan wonder if Runner was of an age with the girl who had gone missing. With a shiver, Dan read the name at the bottom of the note: *Little Runner.*

"Do you have any idea of who this Little Runner is?" Dan asked.

"Yes, I do. Unfortunately, Little Runner has an uncle in high places that paid to have the whole thing buried, and I've never been able to prove anything. The young girl's body has never been found. From what I could find, she was taken to Little Runner's family place on the outskirts of town. On it there is a wooden shack with no windows. When we got there, we found a pair of panties that belonged to the girl, but the family claimed not to know how they got there. Out in that area, just off the Mississippi River, shacks are commonly used by neighbors, and they claimed anyone could have used it while they had gone to town." The retired police officer shook his head.

"You didn't just sit back and do nothing?" Dan let the question hang, knowing this officer would not be there talking to Dan if he had just let the matter drop.

"No, of course not. There wasn't any other evidence. They didn't find any semen that would indicate rape, no other hair fibers, only the girl's. I tried to get a search warrant for the family house, but it was blocked by a Senator Brasseaux. So I was never able to prove anything, and shortly after that, the suspect was rushed out of state to a private school."

As Dan sat there staring at the two files and the similarities, there was something that nagged at him about the senator's name. He couldn't recall anyone by that name, but something about it struck a familiar chord. Dan looked up with recognition dawning.

"Son of a bitch, it's been right under my nose the whole time. I just didn't put it together." Dan slammed his hand on the counter, making the coffeepot jump and spill.

"I've been keeping tabs on the suspect since to see if there were any other disappearances, and until now, there haven't been," Officer Delaney said. "I'm impressed how fast you recognized who you were after."

"I need to make a few calls. Can you take me to this shack?" It only made sense that Runner would run true to form and take Jenny to the same place before Jenny was spirited away to the secret place.

"Yes, go make your calls, and we'll be on our way." Officer Delaney sat in the chair Dan had vacated and bent his head to read over the file on Jenny Dan had left on the table. "It's the same pattern. The notes are all the same. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize they're written by the same

person, even if it has been ten years between episodes," he muttered to himself.

Dan went to the other room to place a call to the captain. Greg assured Dan he would get the necessary search warrant and contact him as soon as anything turned up about a place Jenny might be taken.

Dan then placed a call to the mayor and gave him the same information. The mayor told Dan if the captain had any trouble with the warrant, he would step in and make it happen. Dan didn't think there would be any problems. He would have an officer at the station fax Greg the pertinent information from the file that Officer Delaney brought so that Greg could show the judge.

"I made a call to Officer LeBlanc. He's sending out an APB on Bonnie," Dan said as he joined the other man in the small living area of the coach. "I couldn't reach anyone at the bed-and-breakfast. They must be on their way here." No sooner had Dan finished speaking, than the door opened to admit the others.

"I have good news. Well, I should say Officer Delaney has brought some information that will help us find Jenny," Dan informed them as they all found seats in the crowded area.

"What?" Marla asked anxiously.

"I can't really go into it right now. We need to get going. Officer Delaney and I are following a lead. The rest of you can stay here or go on back to the bed-and-breakfast. We won't need you to search for now. I'll let you know as soon as possible if we need you to start again." Dan held up his hand to stop the comments. He said good-bye without waiting, and he and Officer Delaney headed out to the car. Dan told the officer that he would be back in a moment. He just needed to give the file to someone to fax to the captain. But the man stopped him by placing a firm hand on his wrist. At Dan's inquiring glance, Officer Delaney explained.

"On my case, someone let the senator know what was going on, and I was stopped in my tracks. The senator still holds a lot of power in this town. I think it best we stop for a brief moment at the local copy shop and shoot the fax off from there, just to be on the safe side. And stop calling me Officer Delaney. The name's George." He let go of Dan's arm and sat back in the seat.

"Okay, George, we'll do it your way. I don't want anyone to know what

we're doing." Dan got into the driver's seat and let George give him directions to the nearest copy store.

* * * *

Jenny thought she was going to go crazy. It seemed as if she had been left alone in the shack for hours. *What are they doing? Dan must be sick with worry.* Jenny stood and walked to the door and tried it again. She didn't know why. It just gave her something to do. Even fruitlessly checking the door every so often was better than doing nothing at all. She started to pound on the door with her fists and call out. After her hands hurt, she decided no one could hear her anyway and she was only hurting herself, so stopping in defeat, she started to turn away from the door just as it burst open.

Jenny turned to look, expecting to see the man in the coveralls again, and stopped dead when she saw Bonnie standing in the doorway. With a squeal of delight, Jenny threw her arms around Bonnie.

"You found me. Oh, I'm so glad. Where's Dan?" Jenny asked as she tried to look around Bonnie to see if Dan was behind her. But Bonnie just turned and shut the door, blocking the view. Then she turned back to Jenny. The smile on Bonnie's face made Jenny sick to her stomach, and she begin to back away from her friend.

"Jenny girl, haven't you figured it out yet? I'm Runner. I've been so since I could walk, or should I say *run*. My family tells me I never walked as a child, I always ran, so I got the nickname of Little Runner. As I got older, the *little* part was dropped." Bonnie pulled Jenny toward her and put her hands on Jenny's face and brought her lips to hers and gave her a soul-searching kiss.

Jenny broke away and instinctively slapped Bonnie across the face as hard as she could. Giving Bonnie a cold stare, she wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. She shouted, "How could you? I've always loved you as a friend. Why are you doing this?" Jenny couldn't understand what was going on. Bonnie had never given any indication that she had thought of Jenny other than a friend or a sister.

* * * *

Bonnie didn't answer, just pulled back her fist and gave Jenny a right hook to the jaw. Jenny crumpled to the floor without a sound. Rubbing her fist, Bonnie looked down at Jenny and shook her head. *Not smart, girl.* Jenny was supposed to understand they were soul mates. It was Dan's fault. If he hadn't come on the scene, everything would have gone as planned. After the tour, Bonnie would have invited Jenny to the getaway she had built for just the two of them, and Jenny would have wanted to stay, realizing how much they were meant to be together. Looking down at Jenny, she thought, *Sorry, Jenny, it's time for your punishment.*

"Jake, get in here," Bonnie opened the door and called.

"What have you done now, Runner?" Jake asked as he looked down at Jenny's still body.

"Nothing, just put her to sleep so she'd be easier to handle."

"I thought you said she'd be happy to see you and everything would fall into place. The senator isn't going to like cleaning up after you again," Jake predicted as he lifted Jenny's prone body as if it were as light as a feather. Bonnie followed Jake to the truck, where he placed Jenny in the passenger seat.

"What do you want me to do?" Jake wanted to know as he strapped an unconscious Jenny into the truck.

"Well, I figure I've bought myself a day or two. I don't think you'll have company until tomorrow. Just do what you did last time, and claim you know nothing about it. I've made sure all of her clothes have been disposed of this time, so they won't find anything. Scour the tub and shack so they won't find any hair or trace of Jenny." Bonnie started the engine and drove off.

* * * *

Jake stood for a long time watching his younger sister drive away. The girl had been bad for the family when in high school. Luckily, their uncle had sent Bonnie off to Juilliard, and the whole thing had been forgotten. He wanted Bonnie to be happy. He just hoped that it would work out this time. Bonnie hadn't meant to kill the young girl ten years earlier. They had been struggling because the girl wanted nothing to do with Bonnie, and the girl

had slipped and hit her head. Jake had been the one to dispose of the body. Bonnie had been devastated, not understanding why the girl hadn't returned her feelings. He hoped Jenny didn't meet the same fate. There wouldn't be any covering up of the disappearance of Blade.

* * * *

After Dan and George faxed the file to Greg, they made one more stop. At the bed-and-breakfast, Dan told George if they were right about Bonnie, they would probably find Doug in his room. Dan hoped he would only be incapacitated and not dead. The two went in search of Rosa so she could let them into Doug's room. When they opened the door, Dan was proved right. Doug was tied to the chair with a gag in his mouth.

"Okay, buddy, hold still a minute. I'll get you out of this," Dan said as he set to work to untie Doug's hands. As soon as the gag was out of Doug's mouth, he told them that Bonnie had been afraid if she didn't take care of him and he showed up at the command center without her that one of the others would contact Dan. Then he started spouting obscenities about Bonnie and how she had duped them all. He was struggling so hard that Dan had to tell him to sit still again. Rosa stood at the door watching and wringing her hands.

When Doug finally got freed from his restraints, it was all Dan could do to settle him down. Finally noticing Rosa in the doorway, he decided to give her the task of taking care of Doug, and that would keep both of them occupied.

"So what tipped you off that it was Bonnie?" George asked when they were on their way to the shack.

"The senator's name, it rang a bell. Then I remembered that, when we did the background check on everyone, it had come up as Bonnie's last name. Although she shortened it to Brass, I just thought she did that so it would be easier for the fans to say, you know, show business." Dan kept his eyes on the road as he spoke and tried not to let the fire in his stomach get the better of him. He knew Bonnie would be taking Jenny to the place she had built. But he had no idea how he would find Jenny if they already left Bonnie's family's property.

"I thought it would take some explanation on my part before you put it

all together. I was so frustrated at the time. Before I could get started on anything that would connect the young Bonnie to the girl's disappearance, the senator took her out of the state and placed her in school and then blocked any petition I put through for a search warrant on the property.

"Since then, I have been keeping tabs on Bonnie, watching to see if anyone else disappeared. I thought it was a onetime deal. I thought being part of Blade had changed her, or she was able to satisfy her appetite. I never saw anything in the rag magazines about her being a lesbian. I thought maybe she was just a young girl experimenting and she found she liked men after all. Then I saw the news last night, and I just knew it was happening all over again." George looked out the window as he explained.

"Well, I'm glad you realized in time and got to me. I just hope we get there before she takes off." As Dan finished speaking, they rounded a curve, and a rambling house surrounded with large trees came into view. To the side of the house stood a wooden shack that fit the description from the file. Before they could pull into the dirt drive, a man walked over to block their path. He was dressed in overalls and fit the description Candace had given to Dan.

Dan stated the obvious. "This guy must be the one who hit Jimmy over the head."

"Let me handle this. I'm familiar with the folks around here. Stay in the car," George requested.

"Okay, but don't take too long."

George climbed out of the passenger door and sauntered with his hands in his pockets as if he was on an afternoon stroll in the park. Looking around as if he was lost, he finally stopped in front of the man. Dan watched with impatience as the two conversed. He could see George gesture toward the shack, and the other man gave a negative shake of his head. Dan's stomach tightened. He knew with a sinking heart that they were too late and that Bonnie had moved on with Jenny. He just hoped the captain found something soon.

* * * *

George was impatient, trying to act like he had all the time in the world. Pretending to be looking for his niece, he described Jenny to the man, but

the man recognized him from the previous investigation.

"Officer, I told you over ten years ago we didn't have any idea what happened to that young girl. Why have you decided to bring it up again? It's water under the bridge."

"As I'm sure you know, I'm not here about that. I've come to look for someone else. Fits the same pattern as last time, starts with notes, and then someone disappears. Jenny McGregor, the lead singer for Blade, is missing, and we have reason to believe your sister, Bonnie, has taken her somewhere." George stood waiting for a response, looking around the property trying to see anything suspicious.

"Won't do any good to look around. Bonnie isn't here, and neither is Ms. McGregor. They're friends. I'm sure if they are together it's nothing to worry about," the man said, stepping forward and forcing George to step back.

"Then you won't mind if me and the other officer have a little look around," George stated.

"Nope, go right ahead. We got nothing to hide." He paused and then continued, "Again." The last word was spoken slowly and deliberately.

"Fine, we'll just have a look around." Ignoring the last spoken word, he motioned for Dan to come join him.

"We've been given permission to look around. Says he hasn't seen Bonnie or Jenny," George told Dan when he joined the two men.

"Well, let's take a look then."

* * * *

They walked to the shack first, opening the door and walking in. The room was bare except for a bench and an old brass tub in the middle. No windows or other adornments graced the room. It must have been an old washroom from years gone by. Dan looked desperately around for any clue or sign that Jenny had been there, and could find none.

"Where were you yesterday afternoon?" Dan whirled and asked the man in the overalls.

"I've been here all week. You can ask Ma. She needed me to do some chores."

Dan looked at George. They both silently agreed they'd be wasting their

breath questioning the woman. It was obvious the man had thought how to cover himself. Dan couldn't believe it, another dead end. They didn't have any probable cause to get a search warrant. Candace couldn't swear this man was the one she saw.

"Okay, fine. George, let's get going. There doesn't seem to be anything more we can do here today." Dan had to get away so he could call Greg to see if they found anything in the search of Bonnie's apartment.

Back in the car, the two men got in and drove until they were out of sight of the home. Then Dan pulled over. While George kept an eye out in case someone left the property, Dan pulled out his cell and dialed the captain's number.

"Greg, you got anything for me?" Dan asked before Greg could even finish "Hello."

"Yes, the mayor called in some favors. The warrant was ready by the time I drove to the courthouse. We're in her apartment now. Looks like she joined the group to get close to Jenny. There are pictures of Jenny from before then. They're all over her office. She was careful not to have more than a few in any of the other rooms. Those were of Jenny with other members of the band. The pictures are pretty creepy. Most of them are shots of Jenny when she was unaware of being watched." Greg paused as if to let Dan absorb the news.

"Sounds like Bonnie's been planning this for longer than the notes indicate," Dan said.

"Yes, it's been carefully planned out. We have one of our best guys working on the computer right now. She has several safety guards on, more passwords we've had to hack through than I ever seen. It's taking some time. I found some blueprints for a house, haven't found any evidence of where it is at yet. We're hoping the information will be in the computer when we finally crack all the codes."

Dan heard Greg take a deep breath before he informed Dan of the rest.

"Dan, the blueprints indicate the house is built like a fortress, to withstand some type of battle. The walls are extremely thick, and it looks like it might be built on some cliffs or something. The blueprints show some kind of tunnels or caves. I can't really tell what, but I'd say it has an escape route in case someone finds them."

"I'll need to get those. Can you fax them?" Dan thought if he could get

his hands on the blueprints, it would give an edge over Bonnie. Now all they had to do is find out where this fortress was.

"No, they are too big. As soon as I find something, I'm flying there, and I'll bring them. The mayor has chartered a private plane for our use." Greg went on to tell Dan that he would call as soon as they had anything new.

"Look, Dan, for what it's worth, it doesn't look like Bonnie is out to hurt Jenny, just keep her captive and away from the world, where just the two of them can be together. She has even built a sound room for Jenny to work on her music," Greg said in reassurance.

"I'm sorry if it doesn't make me feel better. You're forgetting Bonnie knows I've done the unthinkable and fallen for Jenny, and she has to know Jenny feels the same. She may not want Jenny any longer. She may have decided to punish her for her betrayal." Dan ran his hand through his already tousled hair.

"There isn't anything more we can do here, George. I doubt Mr. Green Jeans in there is going to leave and lead us to Bonnie," Dan said when he finally put the cell back in his pocket. He felt helpless, not knowing what to do next.

"I'm sorry. I was hoping we would be able to catch her before she left with Jenny. It brings back memories." He turned to look at Dan's face. "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. Bonnie loves Jenny. They have a long history. She'll know how to talk to Bonnie to buy us more time. I believe that gives Jenny a better chance of getting out of this alive. Let's go back to town and fill the others in."

"Doug will have let them know it's Bonnie," Dan said without emotion. He felt he had lost Jenny already. Then, taking a deep breath, he decided he'd move heaven and earth to get her back. He wouldn't let Bonnie win.

"Well, sounds like we may have a long haul ahead of us if we are going to track the two down. Let's get back and get refreshed, and when your captain gets here, we'll know what to do next." George took a breath, then admitted, "I'm not about to go back home until this case is solved. I'll finally be able to live with myself. Ever since that young girl disappeared, I've never forgiven myself for not bringing Bonnie to justice when I knew she was responsible."

"Since I don't have any better ideas, I guess that's what we'll do." When the two men arrived at the bed-and-breakfast, the rest of the group

was gathered in the dining area, and Rosa was serving coffee. They turned as one with expectant faces when Dan entered the room. Seeing the defeat on his face, they all turned back to their coffee and hung their heads. Dan and George found chairs and slid in with the group around the biggest table in the room.

"Sorry, we missed them," Dan finally said.

"How could Bonnie do this?" Marla asked in bewilderment.

"I don't have an answer for you. I talked to Greg. They're at her apartment in San Diego. He said that it looked as if she has been planning this for years." Then Dan went on to outline the rest of what had been found and that Greg would be flying in later that day.

"Doug, have you ever been in Bonnie's office?" Dan wondered why Doug had never suspected anything.

"It was always locked when I went over there. I used to joke she had secrets to hide. I guess I was right. She'd shrug it off explaining that, since she had important documents for the band, she wasn't going to make it easy for anyone who broke in."

"Greg said that the office was filled with pictures of Jenny, almost like a shrine. The rest of the place only had pictures of her with the rest of you."

"Yeah, nothing suspicious. I had no clue." Doug as if he couldn't believe he'd been sleeping with her and had never suspected she lusted after another woman.

"That is just too creepy. How could she have pulled it off? None of us knew anything." Tessa looked at Jimmy, sitting by the policewoman.

"That's why I was so easy to set up. She knew everyone and everything about the case," Jimmy said.

"You're right, Jimmy, and you let her," Dan said. "And most of the time you fell right into her plan. I'm glad I followed my gut instinct. Somehow I just couldn't place you being the culprit." Another time Dan would have contemplated the close proximity of his coworker and the drummer. But he had other things on his mind. "Is there nothing we can do? I'm going crazy here imagining the worst. I need to be doing something," Marty asked.

"Marty, I feel the same way. If I knew where they were headed, what direction, anything, I'd be on their tail. As soon as the captain gets here with the blueprints, we'll form a plan. For now, why don't we head back to our rooms and get some rest? It's going to be a long night." Dan looked at

Marty with sympathy. He knew the man thought of Jenny as a daughter.

After a few minutes of general conversation, the group broke up to do as Dan suggested and went to their rooms to fuel their bodies with sleep. They knew they were going to need their energy for the road ahead.

Chapter Nineteen

Jenny gazed out the side window watching the miles grow between her and the people she loved. She'd come awake slowly and at first thought Bonnie was taking her back. Then she remembered. She refused to talk to Bonnie when she looked over and discovered Jenny was awake. Finally giving up on trying to get Jenny to respond, Bonnie left her alone. Jenny was trying to watch for signs so she would have an idea of where they were going. She had seen a sign about a half hour earlier for Little Rock, Arkansas. She knew they were west of Memphis.

"Are you through sulking, Jenny?" Bonnie said into the silence.

Jenny didn't turn, but continued to watch the scenery go by, grieving for the mother she would never get to come to terms with. She tried not to think about the love she felt for Dan. She no longer trusted her feelings. How could she have been so wrong about Bonnie? She thought of her as a sister. Maybe Dan had just been using her to pass the time until he could figure out who had been stalking her. Look at her mother. She never loved Jenny. Sure, she had been trying to mend fences the last couple of years, but Jenny knew that it had been Ted's encouragement that had Collette calling Jenny that first time.

"You know you can't be silent forever. Sooner or later, you'll have to talk. I'm taking you someplace very beautiful, someplace private. I've even thought of how much you love music. I've built you your own sound room so you can compose. First, though, I have to think of a fit punishment for you. I can't believe you betrayed me with the good detective. Although I bet he was great in bed, you were supposed to save yourself for me. You'd waited all of this time. Why did you give in now? When everything was so close and we were about to be together?" Bonnie asked with real bewilderment in her voice.

Jenny stopped her contemplation of the highway and turned her

attention to Bonnie for the first time. She was staring straight ahead as she drove, and there was a small frown as she thought about what she just said. Jenny wondered if she really believed that Jenny would fall right in with her plans to move to the wilderness.

Just the two of them together forever.

If so, Bonnie had some real mental problems. *What am I thinking? Of course she has mental problems. She has kidnapped me and apparently had been planning it for a long time.* Jenny turned her attention back to the road in time to catch a glimpse of a sign for the Ozark National Forest. They were climbing toward a mountain range, and Jenny could only assume their destination would be in the forest. It made sense if there were parts that were claimed to be wilderness and no one visited it much. Jenny didn't know anything about the Ozarks. She had no way of knowing.

"We're almost there. Another hour and you'll see your new home. You'll love it, Jenny. The whole back of the house overlooks the cliffs. It's built with windows. No matter what room you are in that faces east, you can look out and see for miles. It's high enough so you can look down the mountainside. It's green for as far as the eye can see. There is a waterfall to the north. Its water cut the gorge that formed the cliff where our home sits. Underneath our home, the mountain is formed with natural caves and tunnels. If the authorities ever try to find us, I've made sure they won't. I've covered myself. We can hide in them for months. I have storage and backup generators in one of the caves. All we'll need to do is wait them out." Bonnie was smiling. Then she laughed out loud.

Jenny heard the laugh and turned her attention back to Bonnie. *She really believes she can't be caught, and she thinks it's funny.* With a sick feeling, Jenny was afraid she might be right.

* * * *

After several hours of rest, everyone gathered in the dining room again. No one had much to say, and the room was heavy with the silence, as if it could feel the brooding thoughts. Breaking into those thoughts, the sound of a car had everyone turning to watch the door. As before, it was a false alarm, and the car passed by.

"How much longer? I thought the captain said he was on his way?"

Larry asked.

Before Dan could answer the question, the door burst open, and Greg and the mayor walked in. Greg looked around and must have decided the group wasn't in the mood for small talk. He walked to the big table and spread out the blueprints he had taken from Bonnie's apartment.

"We finally unlocked the computer and found that our Bonnie has been a very busy girl. She had to petition the government to get special permits to buy and build on land in the Ozark National Forest. Fortunately for her, money came in handy greasing a few palms," Greg said as he stepped back for the others to look over the house, or fortress, they were about to try to invade.

"Now I wish I hadn't been so successful in my investment advice for the kids." Paul shook his head at the sight of the house. "Bonnie's fortress has more safety guards than Fort Knox. You'd think she was expecting an army to invade. Maybe she was right," he said, looking at Dan and Ted.

"It wouldn't have stopped her, Paul. Bonnie's family has more money than they know what to do with. That's why she got away with the first kidnapping." Greg stopped and looked around the table when there were gasps all around.

"What do you mean? She's done this before?" Rich stared at Dan.

"You didn't tell them?" Greg asked.

"No. I didn't want to upset them more than they already were. George, why don't you show the others the file? Sorry, guys, I planned on filling you in this evening so you knew what we are up against." Dan ran a hand through his hair. He didn't want everyone to brood about the girl who was missing. He wanted everyone to believe they would find Jenny alive, and that was becoming harder with every passing moment.

The next half hour was filled with George outlining the previous case. Finally, after everyone asked their questions, the focus shifted back to the plans that needed to be made to make sure Jenny didn't fall to the same fate.

"The house sits at the highest point on the cliffs overlooking the gorge and the valley. The back of the house cannot be reached because it's at the edge of the cliff. That must be why Bonnie felt it safe to have the entire east side of the house built in windows. We found the receipts, and she paid an arm and a leg to have the luxury of the view. Most of the expense was the specially made glass." Greg pointed to the east side on the plans.

"What do you mean? What type of glass did she use?" Dan wanted to know every detail so he knew what he was up against.

"It's bulletproof. It's the same glass used in the limos that drive the president around. In fact, she got it from the same company. When we finally got into her files, I was amazed at the government contacts she has through her uncle, the senator. I don't think she would have pulled off all the permits she needed without his help and contacts. I wonder if he knew what she had planned," George said.

"Look here. There is only one way in, and she even had the road built. The road isn't paved that we can tell. Anyway, the receipts didn't show anything other than the clearing and leveling of the road. I believe that's why she made her move now, before the winter weather sets in and the road is impassable. Also, because of the height of the house, Bonnie will be able to see anyone traveling the road for miles. We need to come up with a plan if we want to surprise her," Greg finished.

"Do you have a map of the area?" Ted gazed around. "I've promised Collette I'd use whatever influence I have to help Dan and you find Jenny."

So far, Officer LeBlanc, who'd been sitting with the group since before Ted and Greg arrived, had let Dan lead the investigation. He was sitting back and letting everyone else talk.

"Officer LeBlanc, you and Officer Delaney know the area better than we do. Do you have any suggestions?" Greg asked as he looked at the two men.

"I've done a lot of camping in the national park area, but the location she built in is in a sanctioned-off area. As you said, it's in the proclaimed wilderness area. The government has it protected from outside influences, and no one is allowed to enter without a permit, or so I thought. Senator Brasseaux certainly has more influence than I ever gave him credit for," Officer LeBlanc answered without taking his attention from the prints laid out on the table.

"There are a few people who have gone backpacking in the area with special permits. Every so often a limited number of permits are offered to the adventurers in the area. One of my neighbors happens to be one of the special few. I'll contact him and see if he has ever been in this area." George Delaney pulled his cell out and left the room to talk in private.

"I hope he has luck because we need all of the help we can get." Dan

watched George step outside, then turned back to his study of the prints.

"As to the question Ted asked about the map, I do have a map of the forest at my office. Why don't I go get it now, and while I'm there, I'll check and see if there have been any reports of the truck we believe she's in. Unfortunately, the neighbors could describe the truck that is usually used by Bonnie's family, but from what I've come up with, it was unregistered. I don't have a license number. Give me an hour, two at the most, and I'll bring back all the information I can gather of the area." Officer Leblanc gave a smile to the room at large and left.

There was silence after he left as everyone was lost in their own thoughts as they gazed at the dream house Bonnie had built. It had everything Jenny ever described as the house she would eventually have built when their touring days were over and their attention turned to Celtic folk music and the school they planned to open. Obviously, Bonnie had been listening and making Jenny's dream come true. Now the dream had turned into a personal prison for Jenny.

"Ted, do you think we could get a helicopter and a special team together?" Dan had been studying the part of the prints where the house sat looking over the gorge.

"I'm sure I could. What type of *special team* did you have in mind?"

"Look here, if we come from the north in a helicopter, we could fly down in the gorge, lower than the house. A SWAT team could be let off here in the wooded area." Dan pointed to a spot north of the house. He was thinking that if they could keep the helicopter lower than the tree line with the house windows looking east, the north should be in a blind area from the house. "The trees should block it from the house, and then if there was an area in the bottom of the gorge to land, the pilot could wait for a signal to bring the helicopter up to the level of the house."

"I think it might work," Greg said as if thinking the same thoughts as Dan. "Once the team reaches the house, the rest of us can come in by car. If Bonnie sees the cars, it might distract her enough the SWAT team could surprise her before she can get to the tunnels."

Before any more discussion on the plan could take place, George interrupted. "Sorry, my neighbor has never had a permit in that area. He did say he would call the others in his hiking club to see if any of them knew the area." Without further comment, Dan filled George in on what he missed.

"Hey, we took the coaches back to their parking lots and came to join in the search," Jason said. "I figured when you didn't show up back at the command post, it must have changed. Ron, Kelly, Tom, and I made an executive decision to pull up shop and come find you guys. Not that we are important or anything, but you could have let us know what was going on." Jason pushed the door shut behind him, and the sound reverberated around the room and successfully stopped any conversation going on when the four entered.

Silence greeted the four men as all eyes turned to them, some with chagrin and others with surprise. Then everyone seemed to be talking at once, all apologizing for the oversight. Holding up his hand, Jason silenced the room again. "It's all right. We know everyone is worried about Jenny, so we'll forgive you this one time. Don't let it happen again."

"Jason, we're so sorry. You and Ron have been with us forever. You're part of us, and there's no excuse for our thoughtlessness," Marla said as she stood from Rich's lap where she had perched looking over the map. She walked over and gave each of the men a little hug and then hustled them over to the table to join the others.

"I'm sorry. I was so upset when we missed Jenny. I knew Marty and the others had come back here, and I didn't even think. I just came straight back." Dan turned back to the limited map they had. "I hope Officer LeBlanc gets back with a map soon. We really can't see how far this gorge goes north or south from the property."

"Why doesn't everyone start calling me Louis? It's a lot easier than Officer LeBlanc." Louis had arrived directly after the drivers, but no one noticed his entrance.

"Did you get a map?" Dan swung around to stare at him.

"Yes, I had maps of the state and all of the national parks. Here's the map for the Ozark area. We can take Interstate Forty through Little Rock. It's about two hundred fifty miles or so from Memphis before we merge onto US Sixty-Four. That will take us to the Ozarks." Laying the map by the blueprint of the house, which included a small map of the surrounding area, he continued. "It looks like Bonnie had the dirt road cleared directly off of AR Two Nineteen. The problem is going to be finding where to turn. I can't tell how far we need to travel from the highway before we find the road."

The rest of the evening was spent with suggestions of what the plan was

going to be. Everyone was in agreement the officers traveling by car would only begin the trek up the dirt road when they got the signal from the SWAT team who would be brought in by helicopter from the north. Much to Dan's aggravation, they wouldn't be implementing their plan until after midnight. Other than Dan and Greg, the others were told in no uncertain terms they would have to stay behind. The only reason it was agreed upon was Jenny's life was at stake, and no one wanted to risk it with inexperienced civilians helping in the search.

* * * *

Jenny awoke with a start. She hadn't realized that she had fallen asleep. Sitting up, she took stock of her surroundings and noticed she was alone in the truck. Darkness had fallen, and without thinking, she reached for the door, only to have it open before she could grasp the handle. Giving a start, she shrank back and then saw it was Bonnie opening the door so she could get out. She brushed away Bonnie's hand and climbed out on her own. The long drive had put her legs to sleep, and she had to stand a moment to get her balance.

"Welcome home, darling," Bonnie said.

Jenny felt Bonnie draw her close. She remembered what had happened earlier when she had slapped Bonnie. Jenny quickly turned her face away and tried to pull free instead. Bonnie's aim fell short, and the kiss landed on her cheek. But Bonnie must have been in a good mood after reaching their destination because she let it go without comment. Keeping one arm around Jenny, Bonnie pulled her toward the dark house looming over them in the darkness.

"I'll give you the tour in the morning. I'll just take you to your room tonight. You're going to love it, Jenny," Bonnie repeated as she reached past Jenny to open the door. It wasn't locked.

"I hate to put a damper on your joy, Bonnie, but I'm not going to love it," Jenny said dryly. Bonnie was completely delusional if she thought that Jenny would be happy to settle in as planned. *Doesn't Bonnie know that a prison is still a prison, no matter how beautiful, if someone is kept there against her will?*

Bonnie paused and looked at her for a moment. "I know you'll come

around. I can't wait for the morning when you can see the place in the early morning. It will take your breath away. After the tour, we'll get your punishment out of the way, and then you'll come around."

Jenny didn't say anything. What could she say except to repeat that Bonnie was delusional? Somehow, she didn't think it would go well if she voiced her opinion.

* * * *

Nothing but the best materials had been used, and it literally cost her millions to build. Bonnie needed to punish Jenny for her lapse with Dan. Jenny would come to understand she was meant for Bonnie. They were soul mates. Bonnie had been undecided about whether to continue her plans when she found Jenny with Dan. But when she had kissed Jenny at the shack earlier in the day, the butterflies in her stomach and the warmth that had spread through her had been the decision maker.

Bonnie never felt that way when she kissed Doug, or any other man for that matter. What she felt for Doug was sexual release. What she felt for Jenny was passion and love wrapped up together. No, she would punish Jenny, but she would continue with her plan; she had no choice. She might as well be dead if she couldn't live with Jenny.

* * * *

Jenny shivered at the intense regard that Bonnie was giving her. God help her, but she was afraid of one of her best friends. *What does she mean I need to be punished? Oh God, what is she going to do?* Jenny looked around the foyer of her new prison as the two of them stepped past the threshold. It was certainly beautiful; it had a real marble floor, and the rooms were built around it in a *U*-shape. The ceiling was high, not interrupted by the second floor, and the curving staircase was the focal point and looked like something out of *Gone with the Wind.*

Bonnie let go of Jenny's waist when they entered so she could code in the alarm. Jenny guessed that now they were there, leaving the door unlocked was out of the question. Without Bonnie's arm around her waist, she wandered to the staircase, then decided she wasn't going to give Bonnie

the satisfaction of knowing she found the foyer beautiful. She determinedly started to climb the stairs, assuming her room would be on the second floor.

Jenny heard Bonnie behind her taking the stairs two at a time. When she caught up with her, she took her arm. “Here, let me show you to your room. I can’t wait for you to see it. It’s everything you’ve dreamed of.” Bonnie pulled Jenny to a closed door, then opened it with a flourish and stepped back for Jenny to enter.

Jenny felt the gooseflesh start at the base of her spine and climb to her head as she looked around the room. She could remember all of the times when she and her friends had been sitting around and she had described her dream house. They all had plans for when they settled down to run the school and only do occasional tours to small venues. The room Jenny found herself in was the bedroom she had described right down to the last detail. Bonnie had spared no expense to duplicate Jenny’s dream. Jenny really thought her plan would never come to fruition because of the expense. It was just something to dream about.

Jenny could tell Bonnie was waiting expectedly for her reaction. Jenny wasn’t going to give Bonnie the pleasure of seeing her amazement. Instead, she walked disinterestedly to the window that made one wall and stood looking out at the black nothingness. She couldn’t see past her own reflection out into the darkness, but she imagined that it would be breathtaking in the morning.

Before focusing on the window as she walked toward it, Jenny noticed the bed in the corner on a raised dais facing the window. She would be able to laze in bed and watch the sunrise. Jenny was sure that Bonnie thought she would be sharing the experience with Jenny in the near future. *It will be a cold day in hell before that happens, sister.*

* * * *

Bonnie waited for Jenny to say something, but the little twit just stood looking out the window. She knew Jenny couldn’t see anything out of the window at this time of night. *What are you looking for, Jenny?* When Jenny made no move from her silent vigil, Bonnie’s rage began to simmer.

This wasn’t supposed be happening. Nothing was going as planned. Deciding to shake Jenny out of her complacency, Bonnie marched to Jenny,

grabbed her arm, and swung her around to face her.

"You can't see anything out there tonight. You'll just have to wait. You have all you need here. You've been a bad girl. Unfortunately, for the next few days, until you come to terms with the situation, you'll have to stay here. I've decided the tour of the house will have to wait until after you've been punished for your transgressions. You don't deserve to see everything I've done for you yet. Only when you earn it will you be able to leave this room."

After Bonnie's words, Jenny swung back to look out the window again. Bonnie watched Jenny's reflection and smiled at the fear she saw there. Maybe now Jenny would understand she was only hurting herself by being difficult.

* * * *

Reluctantly, Jenny turned to face Bonnie again. She folded her arms and waited for Bonnie to continue her lecture. Jenny tried to keep any emotion from showing on her face. She didn't want to let Bonnie see her fear.

"In the morning, I'll have Frau Lichtman come in and clean you up, inside and out, if you know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean, Bonnie. I'm afraid you're going to have to spell it out. I'm not going to make anything easy for you, Bonnie. I don't want to be here, and if I get a chance, I'll escape." Jenny hadn't stopped shaking from when she entered the room, but the shivers increased to the point that she was amazed that Bonnie couldn't see her teeth chatter.

"You'll come around, Jenny. Have no doubt. We were meant to be together. Didn't you feel it in our kiss?"

"No, I was revolted. Bonnie, my feelings for you are sisterly. I don't know about you, but kissing my sister does not turn me on. Now explain, what did you mean by the Frau lady *cleaning me inside and out?*" Jenny was very afraid she did know.

Again, Bonnie ignored the question. "It's Frau Lichtman, Jenny. She's my housekeeper. You'll get to know her very well, and I'm sure you'll like her."

Bonnie went to the closet, swung it open, and walked in. When she reappeared, Jenny saw that she had selected a delicate pink, frothy

confection with a matching robe. She tossed it to Jenny before walking to the door. She turned and looked at her, and Jenny watched a slow, sensual smile spread across Bonnie's face.

"The bathroom is over there. You can go shower and get ready for bed. I'll bring you a tray."

"Wait, you haven't answered my question." Jenny tried to keep the panic out of her voice. She didn't want to wonder all night about her fate.

"Jenny, love, I don't think I need to explain. Let's just say I want nothing remaining of Dan left on your person. When I have you, I don't want to have any reminders between us." Before Jenny could respond, Bonnie was out of the room with the door closed behind her. Jenny heard the click of the lock, successfully locking her in her prison.

Jenny tossed the pink lingerie on the bed and walked back to the window. Placing a hand on her flat stomach, she had a sinking feeling she understood exactly what Bonnie had in mind. Looking down at where her hand was resting, she wondered if she could be pregnant with Dan's child. They didn't always remember protection when they made love. After tomorrow, she might never know. Tears began their silent descent down her cheeks. Jenny made no attempt to wipe them away. She didn't know how long she stood looking out the black window before she heard the key in the door.

Chapter Twenty

Gathered in the dining room of the bed-and-breakfast, the men were putting final touches on the plan. It would take almost four hours to reach the Ozarks. None of them knew how long it would take to find Bonnie's hideaway. So far, the plan was that at midnight the officers who would be driving would leave. At the turnoff on Interstate 40, they would space each car about fifteen minutes apart so it wouldn't be obvious they were together. The first car would be the one on the lookout for the road. Once it was found, they would radio the helicopter to stand by. Then when the cars were in place, hidden off the state road, the SWAT team would take their places.

They were hoping that Bonnie would be distracted by the SWAT team and not notice the officers traveling the long road to the house. Dan would ride in the helicopter. After the team was let off, the helicopter would drop below the cliff line and fly south until it was under the house. From there, it would wait until Bonnie knew they were there, and it would rise up to let Dan off just south of the house. The only drawback was no one could tell by the map how dense the trees were by the cliff line. If the helicopter couldn't get close enough for the team to jump, they would need to be lowered. In that case, it would take more time than they wanted.

"You guys all take care of yourselves," Marla said as she passed food around for the officers to take. No one wanted to take time to stop and get food. The group hadn't eaten since earlier in the evening. Time was marching toward midnight. They didn't know when they would have another opportunity to eat.

"We will. Remember to take turns by the phone. I don't want anyone so tired they fall asleep at the desk," Dan advised. All communication would be funneled through the dining area so none of the officers needed to worry about trying to contact anyone.

"I don't think any of us are going to sleep until Jenny is safely back with

us." Marty had pleaded with Dan to let him ride with one of the officers, promising he would stay in the car when the time came for the officers to storm the house. Dan hadn't hesitated to say no, and to add insult to injury, Paul had firmly agreed with Dan.

"Marty, it will be better with you here. I don't want to have anyone else to worry about. It's going to take all of my concentration to take care of Jenny when the time comes." Dan knew Marty couldn't understand the harm if he went. Dan also knew Marty would intend to keep his word and stay in the car. But people did unexpected things in a crisis. Marty might think he was helping and leave the car if he thought he could help. Jenny would never forgive Dan if something happened to Marty.

After what seemed like hours, it was time for the officers to leave. Dan followed them out the door and then headed to the airport where he would meet the SWAT team and the pilot. He barely kept himself within the speed limit. He felt such a sense of urgency, as if he would be too late again. He didn't know what he'd do if he lost Jenny. He had barely survived losing Sarah. What he felt for Sarah had been sweet and comfortable. What he felt for Jenny was so much more. It was a fiery passion, a gut-wrenching love, and a need so strong he could taste it. If he lost Jenny, it would destroy him.

* * * *

Jenny turned as the door opened. By the look on Bonnie's face, Jenny could tell she was controlling her rage at finding Jenny still dressed and by the window. Jenny turned back, preferring to see nothing rather than look at her captor. She would never think of Bonnie as anything else. She was living a waking nightmare, shut away in the dream house she had dreamed of for as long as she could remember. She had no doubt the rest of the house would be a replica of the home she had talked endlessly about to anyone who would listen.

"I see you'd rather stand there pouting than shower. Well that's fine with me. I would have thought you would want to be refreshed when we had dinner," Bonnie said. Jenny could tell that Bonnie really hadn't planned on her being so obstinate.

"I'm not hungry. Go ahead and eat without me," Jenny said listlessly. *What does it matter if I eat?*

"Now you sound like you're two years old. Come over here now and eat. You need to eat properly. You haven't eaten properly since you joined me yesterday," Bonnie said as she walked up behind Jenny and put her hands on Jenny's shoulders.

Was it only yesterday? It seemed like an eternity since she had seen Collette fall from the gunshot. She finally turned and let Bonnie lead her to the table. Bonnie was right. What good would it do to starve herself? She needed to keep her strength up so that she could take the opportunity to run when she had the chance.

"Bonnie, in case you haven't thought about it, I haven't had any insulin since yesterday," Jenny said as she sat down at the table.

"Don't worry. Frau Lichtman picked up a supply. I gave her your prescription." Bonnie sat, reaching across the table. She lightly ran a finger down Jenny's cheek, following the track of a tear. "You've been crying. Jenny, there's nothing to cry about. This is your home now. Everything you will ever need is here."

"Not everything," Jenny said, thinking of Dan. She turned her face to pull away from Bonnie's finger, earning her another frown.

"Fine. I see it's going to take a while for you to come to terms. I have patience. After all, I've been planning this since I first met you. What's another day or two?"

"I think I'm just going to eat and then go to bed." Jenny knew it wouldn't do any good to argue with Bonnie. She'd let Bonnie think she was coming to terms, as she put it, with the situation. The sooner Bonnie let her guard down, the sooner Jenny could find an opportunity to escape.

"You've had a long, emotional day. I was going to sit here and have dinner with you. I can see you are not in the mood for company. I'll leave you to your solitary dinner. I have things to do." Bonnie stood and left.

Jenny watched Bonnie leave the room, then turned to eat. She hadn't thought she was hungry. As she began to eat, she realized how long it had been since she had eaten. Finishing the last bite, she patted her full stomach and stood. It was time to get ready for bed and try to get some sleep. She would need all of her wits about her the following morning. Jenny wondered how she would avoid the *cleaning* Bonnie had threatened her with.

* * * *

The sun was just beginning to peek over the horizon when Dan; Clayton, the pilot; and the SWAT team began their descent into the northern end of the gorge above Bonnie's home. The officers were all parked out of sight on the road waiting for word. It had taken them longer than they had anticipated to find the road leading to the house. Bonnie had planned well and had all but hidden the turnoff.

Luckily, the trees were about fifty yards from the edge of the cliff. The helicopter could get close enough for the SWAT team to jump to the ground. Clayton was an excellent pilot, Dan had been assured. He would be able to keep it steady long enough for all the men to get off safely. As soon as the SWAT team was on the ground, they would quickly surround the house. Then Dan would radio Rich so he could alert the others it was time to start their trek to the house from the highway. Dan would be let off to circle around to the front of the house.

* * * *

Jenny was lying in bed watching the day begin after experiencing the longest night of her life. She had tried everything to get some rest. Her brain just wouldn't shut down long enough for her to get five minutes of sleep. As a result, she was exhausted. On top of that, she was starting to feel the effects of being without her insulin for over a day. Bonnie better bring it to her first thing, or she wouldn't have a choice but to leave their hideaway. Maybe Bonnie had hired Frau Lichtman as a nurse, in case Jenny had any health problems. She shivered at the thought. That led her to think about what Bonnie had told her about her plans to have Frau Lichtman *clean* her.

Unable to lie in bed any longer with only her thoughts to keep her coming, Jenny climbed down off the dais. She found some jeans and a sweater in the closet. As she headed toward the bathroom, she turned her head to look out the window. She could have sworn she saw a flash of light. When she didn't see anything else, she gave a shrug and turned back toward the bathroom. She had barely put her leg into her jeans when she heard something. Quickly, she pulled them up and let the nightgown flow over the jeans, she slipped her feet back into her slippers and stepped out of the bathroom.

Before Jenny could take another step, the door to her room flew open and then shut with a bang. Bonnie rushed in without looking at Jenny and went straight to the window. Curious, Jenny followed her. Stopping beside Bonnie, Jenny tried to see what had Bonnie so upset. She could see nothing for a moment. As they both watched, a helicopter began to emerge from the cliff line, seemingly out of nowhere. The whirling blades were the first to appear. The cockpit was next, clearly showing the two men in the seats. As Jenny watched, the man she loved smiled and put a hand to the window of the helicopter. Jenny raised her hand and laid it to the glass of her prison.

Bonnie whirled, grabbed Jenny's arm, and pulled her away from the window. Jenny continued to look back as long as she could, keeping eye contact with Dan. Then they were at the door of the room. Before Bonnie could open the door, a large blonde woman entered. She was in her late fifties, dressed in white as a nurse would be. She stood in their path, raising a black bag for both to see.

"I'm here to do as you asked, Ms. Brasseaux," the woman said to Bonnie.

Jenny had never heard the name before and wondered what else she didn't know about her so-called friend. She felt a sense of relief as she realized that Bonnie couldn't allow Frau Lichtman to touch her. There wouldn't be time.

"We have company. It will have to wait. Frau Lichtman, go to the security room and activate the shields, and hurry. We don't have much time. I'm taking Jenny to the caves," Bonnie instructed as she pulled Jenny through the door.

With a sinking heart, Jenny heard what must be the shields sliding into place. She wasn't sure what they were or where they were. She only knew it would be more difficult for Dan to reach her. As Bonnie pulled her through the library, Jenny kept a watchful eye to what Bonnie did so, if she got the opportunity, she could retrace their steps.

Stopping in front of a bookcase, Bonnie removed a book and pulled a lever, and the case slid smoothly to the side. Bonnie began to pull Jenny through the opening. Stalling for time, Jenny stopped and tried to pull out of Bonnie's grasp.

"Bonnie, I can't go any farther. I'm starting to get sick. If you don't give me my insulin, I'm going to get hyperglycemic."

"Oh, come on, you're just stalling. I've seen you go without insulin for a day."

"The last couple of days have been very stressful. This is the worst time to go without." As she struggled with Bonnie, she worked one of the slippers half off.

Giving up the struggle, Jenny let Bonnie pull her through the entrance to the caves. As the door began to slide closed behind them, Jenny tried to stop again. As she did, she kicked back with her foot to let the slipper drop. She didn't dare look back and alert Bonnie. If her plan worked, the slipper would stop the progress of the door. Dan would be able to find where they had gone. Then Jenny remembered the shields and hoped that Dan would get in the house to find her clue.

* * * *

As the helicopter rose, Dan watched the cliffs give way to the solid wall of windows. Then he saw Bonnie and Jenny standing at the window watching. Instinctively, he reached out a hand as if he could touch Jenny. He watched her return the gesture before Bonnie pulled her away. But Jenny kept watching until the helicopter was out of sight of the house.

"Man, you need to pull yourself together," Clayton told Dan.

"I know, sorry. Let me off right over there. I can go around to the front and meet the SWAT team." Dan watched as Clayton expertly maneuvered the helicopter so he could jump to the ground.

Once on the ground, Dan raced around to the front, knowing that Bonnie was taking Jenny to the caves. When he found the front door, a shield blocked his way. Frantically, he looked for a way to break through. Much to his frustration, there wasn't any. The shield had slid across the door from one side to the other, through a slot around the door. He could hear the cars coming up the mountain, and he wondered if they would be able to break through it. Looking around for a fallen tree trunk or something to use, he finally realized the futility. *This isn't some medieval castle, for God's sake.* Looking around for a window to break, he found shields on all of them. Wondering what to do next, he turned to see the first car arrive.

Dan watched Greg climb from the car, looking over the house as he did. Greg reached back in the car and pulled out the plans, then walked around to

the front of the car where Dan joined him.

"Looks like Bonnie had some secret surprises. The office geeks didn't find anything about the shields," Greg said with disgust as he searched the plans for an opening.

"Look." Dan pointed to a place that looked like a door on the side of the house. "Maybe she had an escape route so she wouldn't be caught inside. The caves come out on the ledge here. She'd have nowhere to go."

Without waiting for Greg, Dan started in the direction of the door. Walking to the north and around, he came to a door at the edge of the house where the cliffs began. It was hidden and had been built to blend with the siding. A casual look would not detect a door. Dan and Greg stood and looked at each other. Without further comment, they rammed their shoulders into the door. It didn't budge. Looking for a lock, Dan could find no way to open the door from the outside.

The SWAT team had surrounded the area. With the shields up, there wasn't a way for them to storm the house as planned. Dan motioned for a couple of the team to come and help them get through the door. Looking around the area, Dan found a large log. Although he had discarded the thought earlier, it seemed they would be trying it after all.

With four men on each side, Dan counted to three. On each count of three, they would use their combined strength to ram the door. About the time Dan was ready to call a halt, the door gave way. Greg and Dan were the first through the door. After hastily disposing of the log, the others followed. Dan heard Greg give the SWAT team orders to split up and search the house.

"Dan, remember where the library was on the prints?" Greg asked as he followed Dan through the maze of what must have been the staff rooms. Fortunately, they did not encounter anyone as they wound their way through the house to the library.

There was just a handwritten side note on the prints that the door leading to the caves had been built in the library. Greg turned left as they entered, and Dan went the opposite. Dan very carefully began to feel over shelves, moving books and looking behind. Then he saw something pink on the floor at the bottom of one of the bookcases.

Bending down, he found Jenny's slipper wedged in the opening of the bookcase, marking the entrance. *Good girl,* Dan thought as he straightened

to show Greg. Before he could utter a word, he was stopped by a shouted "Halt." Turning, Dan faced a large blonde woman with an automatic rifle pointed at his head.

Greg, out of the woman's vision, whirled at the same time, automatically bringing up a leg and kicking the rifle out of the woman's hand. Before she could recover, he threw a right hook, successfully knocking her to the floor. Dan sprang into action and stepped on the woman's back to stop her from sitting up. Greg took his cuffs off his loop and bent to handcuff the woman, taking her out of commission.

"That is one big woman," Dan stated as he removed his foot, deciding the woman had been subdued. Before the thought had ended, Frau Lichtman swung both legs out and knocked Dan to the floor. Instinctively rolling with the fall, he brought himself up in one fluid motion. Turning, he kicked the woman's legs back and looked up at Greg with a grin as he pulled the tieback tassel from the drape. Bending, he tied the Frau's legs to the base of the heavy wrought-iron fireplace.

"Greg, look." Dan brought Greg's attention to what he had discovered before he had been interrupted. "Jenny must have left this without Bonnie knowing. I'm going to follow. I want to go alone so Bonnie isn't alerted. Have the men stay around the house, and tell Clayton to have the helicopter ready to pick Jenny and me up at the cave's entrance."

"I don't think you'll be able to get to the helicopter from the cliffs. The caves don't look like they have access. They almost look like they open to a sheer drop," Greg warned.

"I have no other choice, unless I can somehow get around Bonnie and head back once I've found Jenny. I'll do my best to come back to the house. If not, have Clayton ready," Dan opened the bookcase and prepared to enter in search of Jenny.

* * * *

Jenny was no longer pretending exhaustion and fatigue. If she didn't get her insulin soon, she would have a reaction. It was never smart for her to go without insulin for too long, but it could be deadly with the added stress.

"Bonnie, I need to rest. I'm serious. I'm about ready to pass out. If you don't want to believe me, that's fine, but be prepared to carry me out when I

do." Jenny pulled her arm free and sat down with a plop. She rested her head back against the wall of the cave. She tried not to think about the bugs that might be crawling into her hair.

"Fine, rest. I won't be able to protect us if I have to drag you," Bonnie said in disgust. "Jenny, don't move. Here is a flashlight. Leave it off to conserve batteries. When you hear me coming back, flash it once so I can find you." Bonnie bent to hand the light to Jenny, then straightened.

Jenny kept the light on long enough to see Bonnie go left at a fork in the cave. Deciding to rest for just a minute, she would take the other path away from Bonnie. She was weak, but she was stronger than she had led Bonnie to believe. After a moment, she took a deep breath and got unsteadily to her feet. Before she could take a step, she heard something behind her. Flipping the switch on the flashlight as she turned, she brought it up to shine in Dan's face. She was so relieved to see him that she stood frozen.

* * * *

Dan rounded a corner to see a glimpse of pink on the floor a moment before he was blinded by light. Holding up a hand, he tried to see who was there. He didn't think Bonnie would wear pink slippers, so he concluded it was Jenny. He couldn't tell if she was alone or not.

"Jenny," he whispered.

Dan was relieved when Jenny finally dropped her arm and the light focused on the ground instead of him. He looked around for Bonnie and then watched Jenny take a couple steps toward him. He started to spread his arms, then saw the indecision on her face as she stopped and pulled her arms around her waist.

The barriers Jenny pulled up to protect herself were almost physical. With time of the essence, Dan couldn't analyze her reaction. Instead, he chose to find out later what was bothering her. When she was safe.

"Dan, you came," Jenny said, then started to lean into the cave wall.

"Jenny, are you all right?" Concerned, Dan reached out to catch her, only to have her weakly step out of reach. Frowning, Dan dropped his arms again and waited for her to answer.

"I'm fine, a little weak. I need to get out of here. I haven't had my insulin since Bonnie took me." Jenny put a hand up to stop Dan when he

again tried to reach for her.

"No, we need to get out of here. You can't be carrying me. I want you to have your hands free. I'll be okay. Come on. We need to hurry before she comes back."

"Which way did she go?" Dan decided that her lack of insulin must be why she was acting strangely. He'd just have to get her to a hospital as soon as he could.

"She went down that fork. Let's go back or go the other way." Jenny briefly shined her light the way Bonnie went, careful to not shine it down the cave, keeping the beam on the cave floor.

"I don't want to be trapped in here, so let's take the other way out of the caves, and the helicopter can pick us up." Dan motioned for Jenny to lead the way. "I'll follow in case Bonnie comes up behind us."

"Okay, let's just hurry." Jenny started off, turning the light off when they were in the cave leading parallel to the one that Bonnie had taken.

They were feeling their way along the cave. Dan took the light a couple of times to shine the beam along the cave floor periodically. So far, they were safe and alone. Then Dan heard Bonnie calling Jenny's name.

"Hurry, Bonnie just discovered you're gone. Hopefully, she'll think you have gone back to the house," Dan could tell with each step she was becoming more fatigued. He had to get her to safety before she collapsed.

* * * *

Bonnie left the cave tunnel and looked toward the spot where she had left Jenny resting. "Fuck!" Shining her light back toward the tunnel that led back toward the house, Bonnie saw nothing. Swinging around, she did the same down the tunnel next to the one she had been in. Turning off the light so that she wouldn't be noticed, she stood debating which way to go. She saw a flicker of light coming from the tunnel leading toward the caves.

Smiling, she realized where Jenny was. She didn't want to alert her, so Bonnie decided to take the cave tunnel she had just left and surprise Jenny at the cliff.

* * * *

"I'll shine the flashlight ahead of you for a minute for you to get your bearings," Dan whispered as he shined the light. They were starting to see a faint light, indicating they were getting closer to the entrance.

"Turn it off. I think I'll be able to just go toward that light and we'll be fine."

"Be careful. Are your feet all right? Oh, by the way, thanks for leaving the slipper in the door. Without it, we would probably still be trying to find a way in."

"You're welcome. Oh look, there's the end." As Jenny began to run, she saw the sky appear through the opening.

Jenny pooled all of her energy into getting out of the cave, thinking that, when she got out, she could rest. She ran. One minute her feet were touching solid ground then without warning the sky appeared in full view, and the earth seemed to drop out from underneath her feet.

Letting out a scream as she began to fall, she twisted, frantically trying to reach for something to catch. Her hand brushed an outcrop of rocks, and instinctively it closed on the biggest.

Dan, following closely behind Jenny, watched in horror as she disappeared from sight. Dropping to the ground, he looked over the edge and found Jenny precariously hanging on to an outcrop. Reaching down, he grabbed her wrist.

"Hold on. Jenny, swing your other arm up and grab my hand," Dan said and reached with his free hand.

Before Jenny could do what Dan had requested, Bonnie appeared on the ledge beside Dan. Jenny looked up to see Bonnie pointing a gun at her head. Then all hell broke loose as everything happened at once.

At the same time Jenny spotted Bonnie standing beside Dan, Dan held fast to Jenny's wrist and changed the direction of his loose hand. He swung it back to retrieve his gun from the holster at his back. Dan pointed the gun at Bonnie as she swung her own from Jenny to aim at him. Before either could shoot, the sound the helicopter rising distracted Bonnie. Three shots rang out at once. Jenny's screams drowned out the sound.

Barely missing Dan's arm, the shot from Bonnie's gun hit the ground. The closeness startled Jenny for a moment, causing her to let go of the rock. If Dan hadn't been holding Jenny at the wrist, she would have fallen. Twisting at the same time, Jenny watched Bonnie fall in slow motion over

the side of the cliff. Bonnie had a look of surprise on her face as her gaze touched briefly on Jenny.

Jenny closed her eyes. She couldn't get the look of accusation on Bonnie's face out of her mind. She would probably watch the scene over and over again in her dreams for years to come. She was brought back to reality by Dan's voice urgently calling to her.

"Jenny, listen to me. Open your eyes. I need to know you haven't passed out on me. Please, I need your help I'm not sure how much longer I can hold on to you, sweetheart."

Finally, Jenny looked up at Dan. She tried weakly to raise her other hand to his. But it didn't seem to want to cooperate. He was saying something to her, but her ears were ringing. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the helicopter trying to maneuver close enough so someone could jump and help Dan.

* * * *

"Jenny, look up at me. Come on, honey, you can do it." Dan held his breath waiting for Jenny to look at him. *She must be in shock.* "That's it. Reach up. Grab my hand. We're going to get you somewhere so you can get your insulin. Come on, Jenny, stay with me," Dan said urgently when Jenny's eyes drifted closed again.

"Here, buddy, let me help you. I'll reach down and grab her wrist. Between the two of us, we should be able to raise her high enough for you to grab her other hand. Then we'll pull her up together," Greg said as he lay beside Dan. Dan was thankful that Greg followed him to the entrance.

Greg managed to get a grip on Jenny, and as planned, they were able to get her high enough for Dan to get her hand. Then together, slowly, they pulled her to safety. Dan gathered her in his arms, but she had passed out.

Chapter Twenty-One

Jenny awoke when a sharp pain stabbed at her arm. She looked down to see what had bitten her, but it was an IV drip being put into her arm. Looking around the room, she found herself in what looked like an emergency room. It didn't look like the big hospital in San Diego. It was small and much quieter.

"Hi, welcome back," the nurse said when she noticed Jenny had regained consciousness.

"Where am I?"

"You are at a small Ozark medical facility the law enforcement and forest rangers use in emergencies. We were waiting to get you stabilized before we let you leave. Your young officer will be taking you back to Memphis. They need to check you at the hospital. I think you're going to be fine. I'm Nancy, by the way. And my daughter is a great fan of yours." Nancy smiled at Jenny as she finished securing the IV bag.

"Tell your daughter hello for me. It's always nice to know I have fans." Jenny was glad to think about something other than what had happened to her.

After Nancy left, Jenny was alone to think. She wondered if Ted had been notified about her mother yet. She knew Ted had loved her mother. She was glad her mother had finally found a man she could trust. If she had lived, maybe someday they could have become closer. Now she would never get the chance. Before she could let the tears fall, Dan walked in.

Once by her side, Dan paused to brush a finger down her cheek. "I wish could make all the sadness leave your eyes, but only time could heal the wounds acquired over the last few days. I'm sorry. I couldn't have been more shocked when I found out Bonnie had been duping us all along. Her concerned friend act had had all of us fooled. Hi, Red, how're you doing? Gave me a scare when you passed out hanging from that ledge."

Jenny pretended not to see his shudder. “Dan, does Ted know about my mother?” Jenny didn’t want to think about what had happened out on the cliffs.

“Yes, he’s with her now.” Dan didn’t explain further.

“I’m glad. I know he loved her.”

“Loved her?” Dan Then realization dawned. “Jenny, your mother’s in Baptist Memorial Hospital in Memphis. She’s got a concussion, but she’ll be fine.”

“What?” Jenny struggled to sit up. Dan gently pushed her back down. “I saw Bonnie shoot her.”

“Collette was strapped to a chair and lying on her side on the floor when we found her. There was a bullet in the wall directly behind her. She wasn’t shot.”

“But I saw, or I thought I saw. It happened so fast, and Bonnie pulled me away almost as soon as she shot the gun. I remember seeing the gun jerk, out of the corner of my eye, when she fired it.” Jenny closed her eyes on the memory.

Jenny let his warmth enfold her as Dan propped himself on the side of the bed and gathered her in his arms. She let herself sob out her relief that her mother was alive. She knew the helicopter waited. She didn’t care. She cried until couldn’t any longer. She had needed the release. Feeling better she sniffed a final stiff, and pushed away from Dan. He found a tissue and handed it to her.

“Okay, Red, dry your tears. The others are waiting for you back in Memphis. Let’s get you out of here. It was all I could do to make Marty stay there and not rush here to your side.” Dan chuckled. “Marty used some very colorful and inventive language when he realized I wouldn’t change my mind.”

“Why would he fly here when you’re taking me back?” Jenny asked as Dan helped her to climb out of the hospital bed. She settled into the wheelchair the nurse insisted he use to take Jenny out to the helicopter pad.

“That was my point. He finally gave up. Up for a ride in a helicopter?”

“Do I have a choice?” Jenny didn’t want to tell Dan that she had a fear of flying. That was one of the reasons she liked going on tour in the coach.

“None, now let’s go.”

* * * *

Two hours later, against Jenny's protests, she was being wheeled into Baptist Memorial Hospital. When she was settled in a room, Dan was asked to leave by the attending doctor. The others were left to cool their heels in the waiting room until the doctor said visitors were allowed.

Time flew as she was given tests to determine if her insulin levels had stabilized. The doctor wanted to be sure there had not been any other side effects that needed to be dealt with. Finally, when Jenny thought she would scream if someone else poked at her, the doctor came in to let her know all the test results were back. She seemed to be doing fine.

Jenny had expected the doctor to leave after the good news. Instead, she shut the door for privacy. She pulled up a chair to the side of the bed and sat as if settling in for a long conversation. Jenny squirmed under her silent scrutiny.

"Is there something else I should know?" Jenny asked when she couldn't take the stare any longer.

"Is there something you should tell me?"

Jenny frowned at her. She didn't have the slightest idea what the doctor was talking about. *She looks younger than me. Maybe she isn't a real doctor, and that's why she's asking weird questions.*

"I'm Doctor Cameron," the woman said in introduction, dispelling Jenny's theory.

"Hi, Doctor Cameron. I honestly don't understand what you're asking."

"How long have you known you were pregnant?" Dr. Cameron asked gently.

"I…" Jenny was about to deny any knowledge, but then she thought back to when she had been standing at the window and wondering if she could be. "I only thought about the possibility this morning."

"Weren't you being held captive this morning?" Dr. Cameron looked at the Jenny.

"Yes." Jenny went on to explain what Bonnie had threatened, and how she had been worried that, if she were pregnant, she might never know.

"Well then, I'm glad you were rescued in time then. That could have been fatal for you. Well, dear, I'm sure you have a lot to think about. You will need to tell the father, and then you both have a decision to make."

"What do you mean? Is something wrong with the fetus?" Jenny placed a protective hand over her stomach.

"Not yet, but there could be. There is the possibility of complications that could arise from the past twenty-four hours." The doctor patted Jenny's hand in support. "There is always a chance of problems when a woman with diabetes becomes pregnant. With regular medical care, you should be just fine. I'm just saying if you decide to continue with this pregnancy, you need to be aware down the road. There could be long-term effects from going without insulin during the first trimester."

"I would never terminate my pregnancy. There's no decision to make," Jenny said more defensively than she meant to.

"Then as soon as you get back to San Diego, contact your doctor and have an examination. Here's my card. Have him contact me with his fax number, and I'll forward on your test results so he can monitor your condition. Well, it was nice meeting you. I'm going to leave you to rest. I'm going to keep your eager fans out for at least another hour."

"Doctor Cameron?" Jenny stopped the doctor at the door.

"Yes?"

"Please don't tell anyone about this. I'll tell the father in my own time."

"You don't need to ask. It's your business how you handle it. All I ask is that you get medical attention to monitor your every stage of your pregnancy so you and your baby will be healthy. I'll be in later to check on you." Before Jenny could say more, the doctor opened the door and left.

Jenny was soon asleep, but her dreams were anything but restful. She awoke with a start. She'd been dreaming that she told Dan about the baby. He had laughed and told her he had only been using her while they were on tour to occupy his time until they caught Runner. The dream was so real. She couldn't shake the feeling of despair.

The door opened, startling her out of her reverie. She looked up, afraid it would be Dan. She wasn't ready to see him yet. But standing in the doorway were Marty and Paul with identical looks of concern on their faces. Without another thought, Jenny sat up opening her arms to them. The dam burst. Tears began to stream down her face before either could reach her side.

"Jennifer, please don't cry. If you don't stop, I'm going to be crying with you," Marty warned.

"Jennifer, are you all right? The doctor said the test results were all

good," Paul said at the same time.

"No, I'm okay. I'm just so happy to see both of you." She hugged them, resting her head on Marty's shoulder with her other arm around Paul. They were both standing on either side of the bed with Jenny in the middle. The three sat like that for a little longer and then finally the two men sat down by the bed.

"Now tell us what you're feeling, Jenny. It won't do you any good to bottle away everything that has happened," Marty pleaded with her.

Jenny looked at the two men who were her parents in all things that mattered. She wondered how they would feel about her baby. They would be thrilled, of course, but they would also expect her to tell Dan right away. How could she explain she had to have time away from Dan? Although, she'd never keep the baby from Dan—she couldn't do what her mother had done.

However much she wanted Dan, she wanted to be sure he loved her. Her trust in people had been severely shaken. She didn't have a very good track record when it came to matters of the heart.

"I'll tell you all about it, I promise, but I'm going to ask a huge favor of both of you first."

"Anything, honey, you know Paul and I would do anything for you."

"Yes, I know, and I feel bad asking this of you. I need some time alone. I'll let everyone come and visit me while we're here in Memphis. When we get home to San Diego, I want to be left alone."

"What do you mean exactly?" Paul asked.

"I just need some time away from everything. I need to sort out my feelings. I trusted Bonnie with my life. She was my friend, a sister I never had." The tears were running down her face again, and she paused to try to control the torrent.

"All right, we can honor your wishes for a day or two. Then we want to hear everything so you can clear it out of your system and get on with your life." Paul had perched himself back up on the bed when Jenny had started to cry. Now he sat holding her.

* * * *

"Hi, honey," Collette said from the doorway.

All three turned as Ted pushed Collette's wheelchair into Jenny's hospital room. Collette gazed at the loving scene with longing, wishing she was there holding her daughter in her time of need.

Marla had given Collette a copy of the song Jenny had written. Collette didn't have any illusions as to the reason. She understood Marla loved Jenny. She wanted Collette to know what pain Jenny suffered every day not knowing who her father was.

Ted had urged her often to tell Jenny who he was. In the past, she had always refused, but it was time to let Jenny know the identity of her father. When the time was right, Collette would let her know. She refused to believe she was stalling, as Ted would say.

"Hi, Mom, I'm glad you're fine. I thought Bonnie had shot you."

"Oh, honey, I'm so glad you're all right. I was so worried about you when they told me what happened." Collette didn't miss that Jenny had finally called her *mom*. Ted had positioned Collette so that she could reach out to take Jenny's hand.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't remember anything past coming out of the ladies' restroom at the airport," Collette explained.

"You don't?"

"No, I remember turning as I walked out of the restroom. I looked around trying to figure out where to meet the officer who went to get my bags. Then someone hit me over the head. The next thing I remember was waking up in the hospital."

"I'm so sorry you had to get involved."

"I'm your mother. I'm involved no matter what," Collette said a little irritably.

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I just feel bad anyone got hurt on my account." Jenny sighed.

"It's not your fault, dear," Ted offered. "Come on, dear, both of you are getting tired."

"I am a little tired. Ted, I'll try not to feel guilty."

"Good." Ted looked down at Collette. "Now tell Jenny you'll see her tomorrow. It's time to get you back to your room, or the doctor won't release you." Ted started to pull the chair away from the bed.

"But we just got here," Collette protested.

"I know, but Jenny needs her rest, and so do you."

"Ted, thanks for bringing Mom by. I was just telling Marty and Paul when I get home I want to be left alone to sort things out. I'll let everyone know when I'm ready for visitors."

"Of course you just mean your friends, not your family. You'll need our help." Collette deliberately misunderstood.

"No, I don't mean just friends. I mean everybody. I need some time to think. I don't want to see anyone for a while."

* * * *

"What?" Dan exclaimed. He had arrived to hear Jenny's last comment.

"Dan, I'm sorry you had to hear it that way. Everyone, can I have some time alone with Dan?" Jenny wanted to be alone with Dan when she let him know she might never want to see him again. She'd let him into the baby's life, but she would need to be sure of his feelings for her before she'd let him back into her life.

After everyone left, Dan sat in the chair Paul had vacated and waited for Jenny to tell him why she didn't want to have anyone around. It didn't make sense. She needed people now more than ever—if for nothing else, to help get her over the horrible ordeal she had endured.

"Dan, please understand I need to have some time alone. I need to sort out my thoughts and feelings. I've just been betrayed again by someone who supposedly loved me. I've watched a good friend and sister die in front of my eyes. I'm just not certain of anything right now. I need you to understand." Jenny looked at Dan, willing him with her eyes to understand. She raised her hand to her throat, intending to take the pendant off to give it back. It was the first time she realized the pendant was no longer hanging around her neck. Pulling her hand away, she looked down at her palm as if she expected the missing jewelry to magically appear.

"Bonnie must have taken the pendant. I'm so sorry, Dan. I wanted to give it back. It's lost now, and you'll never get it back."

"That's not what matters here, Jenny. What are you telling me? Tell me exactly. Are you telling me to get lost?"

She could tell Dan was getting angry. "I'm asking you to give me time. Please step back. Let me sort out my feelings. I'll call you when I have."

"You're saying, 'Don't call me. I'll call you.' Will you really, Jenny? I love you, Red. I'm not letting you just decide to call it quits."

"I can't promise anything, Dan. I'm sorry. I can't think right now. I think I just need to rest. I'm asking you to honor my wishes in this." Jenny couldn't tell him that she might never be ready to see him again.

Dan stood up, lingering by the bed as if waiting for her to change her mind. When she just lay there watching him, he leaned down and gave her a hard, desperate kiss, then straightened and walked to the door. Jenny put her fingers to her lips. It might be the last one she'd ever get from him. She watched him stop and turn.

"I'll give you two weeks from the time we get back to San Diego to *sort out* your feelings. Then I'm coming to get you. And by damn, we're going to get married." Without another word, he strode out of the door.

* * * *

As he passed the others waiting in the waiting room, he stopped and glared at Marty and Paul as if it was their fault.

"I'm giving her two weeks, that's all. Then I'm going to go visit her. I want one of you to call me every day to let me know how Red is. If you don't, there'll be hell to pay." With that said, he turned and left without looking back.

Paul, Marty, and the others watched until he got on the elevator then they all turned back to each other and grinned.

"You know, it may be fun to watch the fireworks between the two. Dan is just as stubborn as Jenny," Marty said after the elevator doors had closed.

* * * *

Two weeks after their return to San Diego

"Hi." Dan stood by the security desk of Jenny's condo. Reading the tag on the young man's shirt, he continued. "Lenny, is it? I'm here to see Ms. McGregor."

"Sorry, sir, Je—I mean, Ms. McGregor, has asked that no one be admitted."

"Well, Lenny, it's like this. I need to see Je—I mean, Ms. McGregor. I don't want her to know I'm on my way to her apartment, and you're going to help me," Dan said. He leaned into Lenny, making the boy shrink back.

"Sir, I could lose my j-j-job," Lenny stuttered.

Flipping out his shield, Dan felt no remorse using his badge for personal purposes. He needed Jenny, and he'd stop at nothing to convince her that she needed him. He'd given her time, and the time was now up.

"I don't think you'll lose your job when they find out it was police business."

"Well, why didn't you just say that instead of scaring the sh…er, sorry, sir." Lenny walked around the security desk and led Dan to the secure elevator. After he keyed in the private code, he stepped back to let Dan enter the car.

* * * *

"Lenny, thanks, I owe you one," Dan said as the doors closed.

Lenny stood after the doors closed wondering why the officer said he owed him one. He was probably just doing follow-up work on that nutcase who had kidnapped Jenny, as he liked to think of her, a couple of weeks earlier. Giving up trying to figure out the minds of older people, Lenny went back to his desk.

Besides, Lenny hadn't been about to argue with him. He was too big and looked like he just stepped out of an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie.

* * * *

Dan stood in front of Jenny's door. He couldn't believe it. He'd never been more nervous in his life. He had sweaty palms. His heart was pounding. He felt like a sixteen-year-old going on his first date. He didn't even want to consider what he would do if she turned him down. Taking a deep breath, he reached out a fist and pounded on the door. He made sure he was out of range of the Judas hole.

* * * *

Jenny heard the knock and went to the peephole to look out. She could see a shadow to the side of her door, but couldn't see who was knocking. Since she had returned from Memphis, she had been jumping at shadows. She hadn't taken any calls. Every day she listened to her messages, all from her concerned friends. Not one had been from Dan. He had not tried to contact her the entire two weeks. If he loved her as he had said, wouldn't he have at least called to see if she was all right?

Apparently, she had been right about his feelings. Jenny had taken Marla with her to see the doctor when she returned. The doctor told her that everything was going well with her pregnancy. She would need to tell Dan about the baby. She just hadn't figured out a way to tell him without making him feel obligated. The last thing she wanted was for him to want to marry her because of the baby.

She wanted him to love her and then be happy they had created a baby out of that love. Well, it looked like that wasn't going to happen. *What am I doing standing here daydreaming while someone bangs on my door? Well until I see who's there, they can just bang.* Jenny turned to walk away.

* * * *

"Jenny." Dan yelled loudly enough neighbors were poking their heads out to see what was going on. He just smiled at them and flashed his badge, which had all but the nosiest beat a hasty retreat back into their condos.

"Jenny, I'm not leaving. You might as well open the door." Dan waited for a response. "Jenny, I'll stay out here as long as it takes. I'll bang on your door until the neighbors complain and you have to let me in to make me stop."

Dan turned and grinned at the lady next door who still stood watching him. She grinned right back at him and gave him a thumbs-up sign.

* * * *

Jenny started to turn away from the door when she heard Dan call her name out. She stood undecided, wondering what to do. It was two weeks on the nose since they had returned to San Diego. Dan said he'd give her two weeks. This whole time she'd been wondering why he didn't call. He'd been

giving her the time she'd asked for. She decided to make him wait a little longer. She tried to keep the silly grin off of her face. Then the old adage came to mind: *Be careful what you wish for. It just might come true.* "Ain't that the truth," she said.

Finally taking pity on Dan, Jenny opened the door. She just stood looking at him. He looked so good. She'd missed him more than she realized.

Without a word, he stepped through the doorway. He forced her back until he could shut the door behind him with one hand. Then, gathering her into his arms, he lowered his head. As his lips touched hers, all of the pent-up longing spilled over. Without breaking contact, he bent down and placed his free arm behind her knees and scooped her up. Walking into her bedroom, he stopped at the edge of the bed and laid her carefully down.

"I can't wait any longer, Red. We'll talk after. But don't plan on arguing. I'm going to marry you." Dan pulled his T-shirt over his head, so some of his words were muffled, but Jenny heard every one.

* * * *

A few hours later, they were both exhausted from lovemaking. They were lying turned toward each other murmuring words of love. Dan decided it was time to get things out in the open.

"You're not going to give me any trouble, are you?" Dan asked, lazily stroking back Jenny's hair.

"Trouble about what? I'm sorry, I'm having trouble thinking. I'd all but given up hope we had a future. Then you stormed back into my life and literally sweep me off my feet and carry me to bed. I'm a little overwhelmed at the moment."

"Marry me, Red." Dan kissed the tip of her nose as he said it. It wasn't very romantic, but he had to know.

"Well, since you asked so nicely, I guess I will."

"I thought I was going to die waiting for two weeks to see you. I planned on coming in here, talking to you. I wanted to take you somewhere. I was going to get down on my knee and formally ask for your hand. The minute I saw you, all that went out the window, sorry." Dan rolled off the edge of the bed. He padded in all his naked glory to where he had dropped

his pants. He picked them up to fish a small black box out of his pocket and then returned to the bed.

"Jenny, will you marry me?" Dan asked as he flipped open the lid and extended the box. In it, nestled on white silk, was a white gold band with a two-carat diamond winking at Jenny.

"Oh my, it's gorgeous, Dan." Jenny put her hand out indicating for Dan to slide it on her finger.

"Fits perfect, Red. Well, what's your answer?"

"Yes, of course!" Jenny reached a hand out and pulled Dan's head down to give him a big kiss. Then she pushed him back and climbed out of bed.

"I need to eat. I'm starved."

"Sounds good to me. Do you want to go somewhere?" Dan asked. Then with a leer, he added, "I can think of a lot of other things I'd rather be doing. But if you're hungry, I'll get dressed and take you to the best place in town to celebrate."

"No, I just want to fix something here. We can eat out on the deck and look out over the bay," Jenny said. Dan watched her pull on some sweats, not very sexy, but she looked adorable anyway.

Jenny headed toward the kitchen. Dan followed a few steps behind watching the way her cute behind wiggled under the fleece. .

"What can I do to help?" Dan said as he came up behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders as he looked around her to see into the fridge.

"Nothing. You go sit over there and keep me company while I throw something together. It's nothing fancy, so don't expect too much." Dan watched Jenny reach to pull two steaks out of something she'd been marinating them in. After setting everything on the counter, she pulled a bottle of red wine from the rack. She poured Dan a glass, handed it to him, and went back to work on dinner. Dan noticed she hadn't poured one for herself but didn't comment. She must be waiting to have hers with dinner.

"So what do you think about children?" Jenny looked over at Dan as she asked the question.

"I like children. I've checked up on it, Jenny. If we find a doctor who specializes in diabetes and we're careful, we'll be able to have some of our own. However, if the doctor doesn't think you're healthy, we can adopt."

"Knowing that you were concerned enough to ask makes me love you all the more." Jenny swiveled to face the counter as she finished the salad.

"Well, I thought you wanted children, and I certainly do. I don't want you to think that I would love you any less if we couldn't have any of our own."

"We aren't going to have to worry about that," Jenny informed him.

"Oh, you've already talked to your doctor about having a child?"

"Well, I guess you could say that. Dan, what I'm trying to tell you here, and not making a very good job if it, is I'm pregnant. We're going to have a baby. I found out in Memphis. After everything that had happened, it sort of threw me for a loop."

"Excuse me?" Dan couldn't believe what he was hearing. He was going to be a father. He set his glass down and stood. Without taking his eyes off of her, he walked to where Jenny stood waiting for a response. Tenderly raised his hands and placed one on each side of her face to hold and leaned down so his mouth could capture hers.

"I love you, Red, good thing you said yes." Dan leaned down for another kiss, but Jenny put her hand between them to stop him.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?"

"Oh yes, I had planned on talking you into getting pregnant right away. I thought once the school was up and rolling you might want to postpone having children." Dan paused, then added as an afterthought, "Hey, when were you going to tell me?"

"If you hadn't come to me, I would have contacted you and told you. You had a right to know. I wouldn't have kept it from you."

"No, you wouldn't have. I know that. Looks like we better call Paul and Marty to let them know we have a wedding to plan, in a hurry." Dan wrapped his arms around her to give her another kiss.

"Why didn't you call me? I didn't see you after we left Memphis after Bonnie's funeral," Jenny asked. She cuddled in Dan's arms feeling safe and secure, dinner forgotten for the moment.

"You asked me not to, remember? It was the hardest thing I've ever done, to step back. Let you have your space. If you think I didn't make sure you were doing okay, though, you're wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"I talked to Paul, Marty, or Rich every day to see if you were coping. I know you had your first doctor appointment last week and Marla went with you. Rich didn't tell me you were pregnant. He did say you were given a

clean bill of health. Jenny, I should have been with you. From now on, I'm going, not Marla." Dan kissed the top of her head and held her close.

"Yes." Jenny gently pushed Dan back so she could turn and put the fixings for dinner back in the fridge. "I think dinner is going to have to wait."

Taking his hand, she led him back to the bedroom until they reached the side of the bed. She gave him a playful nudge, which had him falling to the bed. She climbed up and over to straddle him and looked down at him with love shining in her eyes. Leaning down, she gave him a slow, tender kiss that soon turned to passion.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"I need to see you. It's very important," Collette said to the person on the phone.

"We're very busy getting Jenny and Dan's wedding arranged. Can't it wait?"

"No, I'll come to you. I'll be there in an hour." Collette hung up before he could protest.

* * * *

Collette stood with her back to the door she had just knocked on. The view was beautiful, but that wasn't what she was seeing as she looked out over the vineyards that filled the Temecula Valley. Hearing the door open, she turned to face what she knew would be the hardest conversation of her life.

"May I come in?"

"Would you go away if I said no?"

"No. This is important, and it can't wait. I know there are probably a million things for you to do before the wedding this afternoon. This is something that concerns Jenny," Collette pleaded.

"Fine, come in. Let's go in the library. It's probably the only place we will find any privacy." He turned to lead the way, correctly assuming Collette was behind him.

"I lied to you all those years ago," Collette began. She refused to sit; she was too nervous. As she paced the room, she continued, "When you asked if I was pregnant with your baby, I told you that I'd slept with someone else and it was his."

"You lied that you slept with someone else or that the baby was mine?"

"Both, I didn't have sex with anyone until after Jenny was born. I was in

love with you. You were my first. When you broke it off, I was devastated. I felt I had to make you pay." Collette couldn't look at the man who was Jenny's father.

"So, let me get this correct. On Jenny's wedding day, you are telling me I'm her father? After all these years, why now? Today?"

"Because, Paul, I love my daughter. I want her to have her wish. Her wish is for her father to walk her down the aisle to her future husband. I owe it to her and you. I'm so sorry about the heartache I've caused both of you. After I told you the lie, I never seemed to have the courage to correct it. Then, when you came into her life, I consoled myself that you were in her life. I didn't need to tell you." Collette walked to the window to look out. She couldn't look at Paul.

* * * *

She had been only fifteen when they were together one time. That one time convinced him that he couldn't pretend to be anything but what he was. Paul tried to break it to her gently the next day. He explained his parents didn't understand the concept of homosexuality, nor would they tolerate it. So, he tried to date girls.

He loved her as a sister, and their time together was special. But the night they made love had not been what he hoped. He then told her he was breaking it off. He was going with the man he loved and to hell with his parents. Paul was in his senior year. He went to college with Marty, who he had been with ever since.

"Have you told Jenny?" Paul wanted to know. The minute Collette told him, Paul had started to shake with emotion.

"No," Collette said so softly he could barely hear her.

He remembered when he found out Collette was pregnant. He wanted it to be his, knowing he would never have children with Marty. If they had DNA testing back then, Jenny's life would have been so much different. He ached knowing all the pain she suffered at Collette's hands over the years.

He was having a hard time not walking to Collette where she stood and punching her lights out. However, he'd always been civil. Marty had always been the one for dramatics. Marty would be thrilled at the news. He took a deep breath. Jenny was his daughter.

"I've always felt like Jenny was my own. Now I know why. Again, I ask you why today?" He hoped Collette would tell him what he wanted to hear.

"Because if I continue to lie to Jenny, I'll never be able to resolve our differences or gain her trust, respect, and, above all, her forgiveness. I'm sure you've heard her song about you? After listening to that, how could I not tell her?" Collette turned to Paul to find him standing directly behind her.

"Thank you, Collette. It's going to take me a while to forgive you. I hope our daughter will be able to forgive you. She needs her mother now more than ever. Marty will be there for her, as always, but it takes a woman to understand the complexities of pregnancy. When are you going to tell her?" Paul knew Jenny wasn't due to arrive for another two hours, which meant Collette would probably have to tell her right before the ceremony.

* * * *

At the church, Jenny sat looking in the mirror watching Martha apply the last of her makeup for the wedding. She wondered if she would be able to keep from crying. Martha was getting upset. Every time she finished, Jenny would start to cry again and ruin her makeup.

"Now, little girl, you be good and don't cry. We don't have much time before you walk down that aisle," Martha said, leaning back to survey her work.

"I know. I'm sorry, Martha. I promise I'll be good." Jenny looked past her reflection as the door opened to admit Collette.

Turning to face the door, Jenny asked, "Mom, what's up? Is it time to go down?"

"Not quite." Collette turned to Martha. "Could you give us a few minutes alone, please?"

"As long as you don't make her cry." Martha folded her arms and glared at Jenny's mother. "I better not have to fix her makeup again."

"Thanks." Collette moved aside for Martha to leave, then turned and closed the door. "Is Ted ready to walk me down the aisle?" Jenny asked.

"He'd love to walk you down the aisle, dear. But I think it's time you met your father. It should be his privilege to walk you to your intended."

Collette waited for Jenny's reaction before continuing.

* * * *

"What?" Jenny wasn't sure she heard Collette correctly. She stared hard at Collette, waiting for her to continue. She thought of all the times she begged to know who her father was. She couldn't begin to count the tears she'd shed until she fell asleep when she was a young girl. Was Collette really going to tell her? Or was her wedding day about to turn into a nightmare?

"I've kept it from you for too long. I've realized I was punishing the wrong person. I was devastated when your father left me for someone else. He'd been the first man I had been with. I loved him. When I got pregnant after that one time, I lied to him and told him it wasn't his. That I had been with more boys than I could count. I was only fifteen, and I didn't handle his rejection very well." Collette stopped.

"And?" Jenny prompted when it seemed that Collette wasn't going to continue.

"I decided, by not telling him, I would be punishing him for hurting me. I never meant to hurt you. I thought you would be better off growing up without a father."

Jenny broke in before Collette could continue. "How could you think I would be better off without a father? All children need a father. Even if the parents don't live together."

"I told myself it was because he was in a relationship with another man." Collette became defensive. "It's hard enough for a woman when the man she loves rejects her. But to have him reject her for another man is the ultimate betrayal."

Jenny didn't say anything for a minute. She turned away from Collette, the woman she was just starting to think of as her mom. Jenny didn't know if she would be able to forgive her. She started to think back over the years. There had never been an explanation for the animosity between Collette and her two surrogate parents, Marty and Paul. With hope in her heart, she turned back to her mother.

"Who is he?"

"Paul." Jenny heard Collette suck in her breath and hold it.

"Paul?" Jenny breathed the name. "Why now? You've known that I've been close to Paul since I was sixteen. Why couldn't you tell me? I've begged you. I've pleaded. I've even tried to trick it out of you." Jenny was having trouble not screaming. Tears were streaming down her face, and the carefully applied makeup streaking her cheeks.

"I blamed Paul for everything that happened to me, believing if he had loved me, we would have been a happy family."

"He didn't make you take drugs, or neglect me, or sleep with hundreds of men, Collette. Those were choices you made on your own," Jenny replied angrily.

"I know that. Ted has been wonderful in making me realize in my quest for vengeance I've hurt the one true innocent. That's you, dear. I know right now you hate me. It was the risk I had to take." Collette paused as if letting the words sink in. "You deserve to have your father walk you down the aisle on this most important day. I hope I haven't ruined it for you. I think we need to talk about this more, but now I want you to calm down. Let Martha fix your makeup. I'll go get Paul and let him know you need him." Collette reached out to touch Jenny's cheek to wipe a tear as it fell, but Jenny flinched away. Collette turned and walked out the door without another word.

After Collette left, Jenny returned to the chair in front of the mirror and gazed at her image. *Sorry, Martha, you're going to have to fix my makeup again.* Then a slow smile formed on her lips, and new tears started to trickle down her face. This time they were tears of happiness. When the door opened after a brief knock, Jenny all but flew to Paul, knocking over her chair in the process.

"Whoa, there." Paul gathered Jenny in his arms. Jenny hoped the tears in his eyes were of joy to match hers. He put a finger under her chin and lifted her face.

"Dad." Jenny began to cry harder at the one word she had longed to say all of her life.

"Daughter," Paul said in return, and the floodgates opened for both.

After what seemed like hours, the two pulled back from their embrace and looked at each other. The identical grins began to spread across their faces. If anyone had been there to witness, there would have been no mistaking the resemblance between father and daughter.

"I can't believe I'm finding my daughter and losing her all in the same day." A lock of hair had fallen across Jenny's forehead. Paul reached a trembling hand up to brush the stray hair back into place.

"You'll never lose me again. You're going to be a granddad. Dan and I will be visiting you and Marty all the time. Who do you think we plan on having as babysitters? We can't trust anyone else with our baby." Jenny was laughing and crying at the same time.

Before any more could be said, the door burst open, and Martha walked in. Taking one look at Jenny's face, she let out a little scream of disgust. She marched to the chair that had fallen by the mirror, picked it up, then sat it down with a bang. She pointed at the seat and stared at Jenny. Getting the hint, Jenny kissed Paul's cheek and walked over to settle herself in the chair.

"I'll be waiting at the bottom of the stairs. It's almost time." Paul closed the door as he left.

"Yes. It's almost time. I told you not to be ruining my work, but look at you." Martha was grinning. Jenny could tell she wasn't that upset. "It's about time the two of you found each other. I've suspected it for years."

Jenny looked at her in astonishment, then said, "Sorry, Martha, I'll try not to cry until the ceremony starts, okay?" But another tear streaked its path down her cheek. Martha just wiped it away without another admonishment.

* * * *

Dan stood waiting at the front of the church, nervous as a schoolboy. The church was filled to capacity with friends and family. His family even decided to show up. That had surprised him. They weren't thrilled to find out he was marrying a famous pop star. Then all thought left as The Wedding March began, and he turned to see his bride on the arm of the man who she just found out was her father.

She looks radiant, and Paul looks like he is about to burst with joy. Then a sob broke into Dan's thoughts, and he turned to see Marty wiping his eyes with his handkerchief.

* * * *

The ceremony passed in a blur for Jenny. Marty and Paul had set up a

big white tent for the reception on the grounds behind their home. It sat on the top of a sloping hill overlooking the neighboring vineyard. All the toasts were over, and dinner was served. The guests were enjoying their meal and talking among themselves. Jenny looked at Dan as he leaned his head toward his mother to hear what she said. He was her husband. She had to stop from pinching herself to make sure it was true.

"Happy?" Paul asked as he reached out and took Jenny's hand.

"Yes. All of my dreams are coming true. I keep waiting to wake up and realize it's all a dream."

"No dream, sweetheart." Marty leaned around Paul to look at his stepdaughter.

"Marty, you and Paul have always been parents to me. Now I know why. I've always felt closer to you both than anyone else. Even Rich, though he's a brother to me. He's always had Marla, so I was the outsider." Jenny looked at her two friends, who even then had their heads together, oblivious to anyone else.

The band struck up the first song, and it was announced it was time for the bride and groom to dance. Dan turned from his conversation to look at his bride. Jenny returned his grin when he reached out a hand. Jenny let him lead her to the center of the dance floor as the band began to play "You Are the Love of My Life." After Dan pulled her into his arms, he softly sang the lyrics of the song. Trickles of desire raced over her with each word.

The crowd watched the wedding couple waltz around the dance floor. Neither noticed when the song ended. Only after the applause broke their special trance did they stop, turn to their friends, and take a bow.

It was the father and bride dance. Jenny turned to find Paul standing and waiting for her. She couldn't believe how wonderful that announcement sounded.

* * * *

Dan knew that he was meant to dance with the mother of the bride at the same time. It just didn't seem appropriate. He decided to do what would be. Marty was more of a mother than Collette had ever been or ever would be to Jenny.

"May I have this dance? It is customary for the groom to dance with his

new mother-in-law, correct?" Dan waited to see what Marty would do.

"You don't have to do this," Marty began, only to have Dan reach down and gently pull Marty to his feet and lead him out to the dance floor to dance side by side with Jenny and Paul.

"Yes, I do." Dan grinned. He looked over to the table to see his parents' shocked faces. "If only to see the look on their faces." He whirled Marty around so he could see who he was talking about.

"You bad boy." Marty giggled.

* * * *

Jenny looked over to see Dan lead Marty out to the dance floor, then nudged Paul so he would look. She looked around at the gathering of all her friends and family. Her life would be anything but boring. She had everything she had always wanted. She turned back to her father and told him she loved him.

Dan turned at that moment, tapped Paul on the shoulder, and asked if he could dance with his bride. Paul stepped away so Dan could dance with her. Jenny gazed over Dan's shoulder as she waltzed away with the love of her life, while her father watched them with his arm around his.

* * * *

Jenny and Dan thanked everyone for joining them in the celebration of their new life together. They turned to run the gauntlet of rice and cheers to their waiting limo.

"Happy, Mrs. Janson?" Dan kissed his bride, glad to have her alone at last. Looking toward the driver, he decided he better wait until they got to their hotel before he made love to Jenny.

"Oh yes, Dan." Jenny said as she snuggled into her new husband's arms. She gave Dan a sassy smile, then leaned forward and closed the privacy shield between them and the driver. The sassy smile had changed to a very wicked gleam in her eye when she turned back to Dan. Dan didn't have to wait until they reached their hotel after all.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary lives in Magna, a little town west of Salt Lake City, Utah. Together with her husband, she has six grown children, and five wonderful grandsons and now she has her first beautiful granddaughter. They will have a new addition in July. Will it be another boy or a girl?

Mary and her husband love to travel, especially to the Caribbean for relaxing and Italy for the wine. With the experience from the exotic places she has visited, she is able to fill her books with *colorful* descriptions of cities, painting a *colorful* backdrop for her characters.

Mary and her husband are avid college football fans. They have season tickets to the UTES, University of Utah Football and they tailgate every game. They love tailgating so much, that they were married at a tailgating in 1999.

Mary is a member of the Romance Writers of America and several sister chapters.

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