

Breakdown in Clifton Forge

By
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**A Newsite Web Services Book
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Published by Newsite Web Services, LLC
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Chapter One

She was scared, more scared than she'd ever been in her life. The weather was terrible but she knew she had to keep going, though where she didn't know.

Mile marker 203

*The gas gauge leanin' on the edge of E
Something smoking underneath the hood
It's a-bangin' and a-clangin' and it can't be
good¹*

The snow swirled around the horse's legs as its rider halted him on the ridge, raising his binoculars to survey the road below. After checking for a few minutes, he nudged the horse onward.

Sheriff Brett Rowan wanted to be anywhere but out in this blizzard looking for a stranded motorist, but when old Andy Franks had called and told him he'd seen a car trying to get down the old Anders Farm road, he'd had no choice but to go looking. So far, he'd seen nothing but mounds of snow, blowing and drifting across the road. It wasn't

¹ Lyrics from "I'd Sure Hate to Break Down Here" by Trace Adkins, "Comin' On Strong" Album

passable, and there were no homes anywhere on it, so if someone was on it, they were stranded.

"Darn fools," he said to the horse. "Has to be some tourist; no one local would have ventured out knowing the storm was coming."

Clifton Forge was a small town in Alleghany County, located in the west of Virginia. Storms in the mountains were unpredictable, and new residents learned fast that they needed to take a storm warning seriously. The warning had gone out twenty-four hours ago, and this storm was proving to be one of the worst they'd ever seen. The snow was already at two feet and it was still snowing.

Route 64, the main road over this area of the mountains, was now impassable. The state highway patrol was directing all cars off the road. Sheriff Rowan's officers had aided them, but now they were all safely back at the station or home. Brett himself had been relaxing in front of his fire when the call came in. He'd been out for an hour and was about to give up, when he spotted a patch of red metal covered over with snow. It had to be a car down there on the road.

He nudged the horse into action and rode down the hill to the road. It was definitely a car, and from the looks of it, could be an old abandoned one, but he had to check to make sure. Cautiously approaching, he swept the snow off the side window and looked in. What he saw had him pulling the door open immediately. Inside was a woman huddled under a bag of clothes, either sleeping or unconscious.

"This is Sheriff Rowan, come in," he yelled into his walkie-talkie.

"Yes, Sheriff, what do you need?" his deputy at the other end responded.

"I found our stranded motorist. There's no way an ambulance will make it here. I'm going to take her back to my ranch. I'll call from there," he replied and hung the walkie-talkie back on his belt.

"Miss, wake up," he said, shaking the huddled figure.

He barely heard a groan as he lifted her out of the car. Her bag stayed firmly clutched in her hands. When the wind hit her, she revived a bit, blinked her eyes, and started struggling weakly.

"It's okay, I'm the sheriff. I'm going to get you somewhere warm and then we'll talk. Hang on to my neck," he said softly, trying to soothe her.

With practiced ease, he swung up on the horse still holding the woman. He kicked his horse, moving as fast as he could across the fields. Taking this direct route, he was no more than a few miles from his house; still, in this storm it would take some time.

The woman appeared to be sleeping again, huddled against his chest, but shaking. She had no boots on, and her clothes and coat weren't heavy enough for this weather. He figured she must be from somewhere down south.

"We'll be inside soon; lean against me for warmth," he said, drawing her tighter against him.

When they reached the house, Brett dismounted, carried her inside, and set her down by the fire. He quickly stoked it with more wood.

"Stay here and get warm while I take care of Blackie."

She nodded sleepily, pulling her coat and bag closer.

As soon as the horse was wiped down and had fresh straw and oats, Brett went back to the house.

The woman, well really more a girl, was sound asleep in the chair. Her fingers had finally released their grip, and both her coat and the bag were in a heap on the floor. It appeared that the bag contained her earthly possessions, or at least what she'd gathered and stuffed in it. He wondered what she was doing here, and what she was running from.

Brett picked up the bag and headed into the kitchen. She needed to get something warm inside her. Soup and tea were soon heating on the stove. He'd spread the bag's contents out on the kitchen table and was now noting the information on her license.

She was Julie Gilberts, age twenty-seven, of Richmond. Her wallet had thirty dollars and a credit card; nothing more. He replaced the contents and closed the bag. The soup was ready, so he placed it on a tray with the hot tea and took it and the bag back to where she was sleeping.

"Wake up Julie," he called.

With a start, she woke and jumped up, her legs trembling.

"Wh...where am I? Wh...ooo are you?" she stammered, her deep gray eyes wide with fright.

"My name's Brett Rowan, I'm the sheriff of Clifton Forge, Virginia. It appears that you broke down on the old Anders Road and were caught in the snowstorm. Fortunately, someone saw you turn off the highway and called me. Now sit down and have some soup," he told her.

Julie slowly sat down, eyeing him warily. She was starving and still cold. Her head ached... in fact she ached all over. It had been hours since she'd slept more than a snatch here and there, and she felt exhausted.

Brett watched her as she nearly inhaled the soup and tea. Without her asking, he took the bowl and cup and refilled them. She blushed with embarrassment when he handed them back.

"I'm sorry, I'm not usually this much of a pig, but it's been a while since I ate," she said quietly.

"Want to tell me what happened?"

Julie really didn't want to tell him anything. What she wanted was to get away from here and on her way as soon as she could. She didn't know how much time she had, but she realized she had to tell him something. She remembered the panic she'd felt when she was in the car.

*I'd sure hate to break down here
Nothin' up ahead or in the rear-view mirror
Out in the middle of nowhere knowin'
I'm in trouble if these wheels stop rollin'
God help me keep me movin' somehow²*

"I... I was on my way to visit a friend, and I was running out of gas, and the car was making a funny sound. I knew there were no towns for miles as I'd just passed Clifton Forge. I decided to get off and see if I could find a road back," she told him in the softest voice she could. The entire time she kept her head down and wouldn't look him in the face.

Brett could tell that was only partially the truth. She was definitely running, but he decided not to pursue it right then. He'd run a check with Richmond later, but for now he needed to get her to bed.

² Lyrics from "I'd Sure Hate to Break Down Here" by Trace Adkins, "Comin' on Strong" Album

"Ok, Julie, looks like you're stuck here with me until this storm decides it's done. You look exhausted, so I suggest you get a nice hot shower and then into bed. I'll show you the guest room." He grabbed her bag and headed off down a hall.

Julie blushed beet red, but followed him. She wondered what he thought of her 'suitcase' but since he didn't say anything, she didn't pursue it.

"Thank you," she said, after he'd shown her the bed and bath.

"You're welcome. I'll see you tomorrow," he replied, closing the door gently behind him.

Brett waited until he no longer heard any noise from the guest room, then called the station.

"Tom, I need you to run some plates and see what information you can find out about Julie Gilbert, Virginia drivers license G 543-7896-90. The plates are Virginia, VFG 348. I want to know a bit about my houseguest, alias the stranded motorist. Call me when you have something," Brett hung up.

He realized he was hungry and made himself some dinner while listening to the police scanner. It was pretty quiet, seemed all the motorists were safely off the roads and in this weather, crime wasn't likely.

He'd finished his meal, cleared away the dishes, and was just sitting down with a brandy to watch TV, when Tom called.

"Not a whole lot to find out. Ms. Gilbert has no traffic offenses and the plates are registered to a Victor Frank Gilbert in Alexandria. I'd say it's her father since the address is different from her license. The car is a 1999 Oldsmobile Cutlass. She has no criminal record under that name; we could run more if we had prints. Do you think something's up?" Tom asked.

"No, just think she's running from something, not sure what, but she's hiding the truth from me. Thanks Tom, I'll check in tomorrow morning. Not sure I'll get in, unless this stops and they plow, plus I have my guest to look out for, and her car isn't going anywhere soon."

Julie fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. She couldn't remember the last time she'd really slept; it must have been at least ten days ago, not since this nightmare had started. Finally she felt safe, at least for now; no one would find her here.

A real nightmare began sometime after midnight and was so real that Julie found herself sobbing as she woke. She lay there quietly tensed, hoping that Brett hadn't heard her. The last thing she wanted to explain was why she was crying. She got up, found some aspirin in the bathroom's medicine cabinet, took a couple, and went back to bed. Her throat was sore and her chest felt tight, but perhaps it was just left over from the dream. Soon she was sleeping again.

Brett had been sleeping when a sound from the guest room woke him. He looked at the clock; it was 1:00 a.m. There were no further sounds and he went back to sleep, only to be awakened by coughing around 4:00 a.m. It stopped, and he slept fitfully until six, when the coughing roused him again. Throwing on a robe, he went to investigate.

Julie was tossing fitfully in sleep and coughing hard. He put a hand on her head and knew she had a fever. Just what he needed... snowed in with a sick guest.

He sat down next to her on the bed and shook her gently to wake her. She partially woke up and groaned. "I don't feel good," she croaked at him.

"I hear that. Were you sick yesterday?" he asked.

She shook her head no, lay back down, and closed her eyes. "I'll get you something for that cough," he told her and left the room.

He brought the cough syrup and gave her two big spoonfuls. She soon quit coughing, but fell asleep the moment she lay back down.

At 8:00 a.m. she was still sleeping, and her breathing sounded labored. Brett didn't like the sound of it, or her fever.

"Doc, this is Brett Rowan," he told the man on the other end of the phone, who'd been his doctor since he was a child. "I've got a young woman here that I rescued yesterday, stranded on the road. She seemed okay last night, but she's been coughing and from the feel of her has a pretty good fever. Her breathing's sounding pretty congested now, too. I can't seem to keep her awake for more than a few minutes at a time. What can I do?"

"Sounds like she could be coming down with pneumonia, but I'd have to check her to be sure. There's no way either of us are going anywhere in this storm. Do you have any antibiotics there?"

"Well, I've got the emergency first-aid kit in the trunk of my cruiser. Let me go check." Brett got his keys, ran outside, and returned with it. "There's a syringe of penicillin here. It says 'Penicillin G Procaine, 1,200,000 units'," he rummaged in the box, "and there's a pack of Penicillin V tablets, 500 mg each."

"Is there any injectable Epinephrine?"

"Oh, in case she has an allergic reaction, huh? Yes there's two Epi-pens in here."

"Good. Ask her if she has any drug allergies first. Give her the Pen-G shot now, then start the pills, one tonight, then twice a day until I can get out there. Watch her closely for at least two hours after the shot; look for a rash, trouble breathing - the wheezing would come from her throat, not her lungs - itching eyes, any swelling of her lips, tongue, or face, and nausea. If any of that happens, use the Epi-pen quick. Other than that, keep lots of liquids in her and try and get her to eat. Most important, keep her warm," Doc told him.

Brett hung up and began to read the directions on the Pen-G insert.

Julie stirred when he came back in the room. When she saw the syringe in his hand, she protested quite vehemently.

"No, I don't want a shot! You're not a doctor, I'll be okay," she whispered hoarsely, which sent her into a coughing fit.

"I'm trained to give emergency injections. Are you allergic to any drugs?"

"No," she moaned, but tried batting the needle out of his hand as he approached.

"Julie, behave! It's penicillin. You're sick and need this," Brett grabbed her hands with one of his. He easily flipped her on her tummy, pulled up her nightgown, and gave her a quick jab in the bottom. Julie yelped but then lay quietly.

Brett put a thermometer in her mouth, which she promptly pulled out. After a few more attempts, Brett glared at her.

"You're a terrible patient! Either you take that temp orally, or I'll do it another way," he growled.

Julie's eyes grew wide but she put the thermometer back in her mouth. A few moments later when he drew it out he whistled.

"You're one sick little lady, it's 103, and that isn't good."

He gave her some Tylenol and juice, then tucked the covers back around her. "That shot should start kicking in, but rest. If you need anything holler, I'll be in the living room, but I'll be back to check on you." She was asleep before he left the room. He checked every ten minutes for the first two hours, looking carefully for any allergic reaction.

Finally around noon, the snow stopped and the sun came out. Brett called the station, learned that the plows were out, and that by morning he should be able to get out.

The remainder of the day Brett spent nursing Julie; she was rarely awake for long, but didn't fight him any more on temps or pills. He'd managed to get her to eat some soup and drink tea and juice. However, the fever kept rising and hit 104 at one point. She whimpered in her sleep and had a few nightmares that had her crying, but each time he held her, and she quieted. By ten that evening Brett was exhausted and went to bed. He set the alarm to check her in an hour, but before the alarm went off he heard her sobbing.

This time when he held her, she was cooler and bathed in sweat. He got the thermometer and was pleased to see her fever had broken... it was down to 99 degrees.

"Julie? Are you awake?" he asked.

A groggy voice answered in a hoarse whisper, "Yes, I think so. I'm embarrassed, I've never been sick like this."

"The storm has stopped, so I think Doc Adams can get here tomorrow. You don't need to be embarrassed, it'll be fine," Brett said as he rocked her in his arms.

He hadn't held a woman like this for ages and it felt good. He was 35 years old and a widower. His wife had died in a car accident 3 years before. After that, he'd put all his energies into his job, and had just never thought about dating or women. Women thought about him though; Brett Rowan was the most eligible bachelor in the county. Even though he was totally oblivious, every woman noticed him the moment he walked into a room. At six foot-five with dark brown hair, piercing blue eyes and rough chiseled features, he was considered the handsomest man around.

Now holding Julie, old longings began to stir. Perhaps it was because she was tiny like his wife had been, and at the moment, helpless. He held her until she fell back asleep and then laid her down and tucked the blankets around her. The bedside light shone brightly on the right side of her face, and he thought he noticed a mark on her cheek. He brushed her long blonde hair away and saw a large bruise that was almost faded. He pulled the blanket down and noticed she had other bruises on her neck and shoulders. Frowning, he tucked her back in. This was something else he needed to get answers to.

When Brett woke up the next morning, the sun was shining in the windows. He got up and peeked in Julie's room. She was still sleeping and her breathing sounded a bit better. After he showered and dressed he prepared some broth and tea for her and took the tray to her room. If she ate that he'd see if she wanted some scrambled eggs.

"Wake up, Julie," he called as he set the tray on the nightstand. She opened her eyes and sat up.

"How, do you feel this morning?" Brett asked as he got the thermometer ready.

"I don't ache as much, but I don't feel real good," she said, her voice barely audible.

Her temp was hovering around 100, so Brett gave her more pills and sat with her as she sipped her tea and broth. When she was done, she fell back on the pillows.

"Would you like something more? Maybe some scrambled eggs?"

"I don't think so now... maybe later," Julie yawned and was asleep before he left the room.

Several hours later, Brett heard the sound of a car and looked out to see a plow leading Doc Adams up to the house. Smiling, he went to greet him.

"Now that's what I call service," Brett called, waving to the plow operator.

"How is she this morning?" Doc asked as he stomped the snow from his boots.

"Her fever is down, and her breathing sounds better, but she's still pretty sick. I noticed some bruises on her face and neck last night. When you examine her, would you question her about them?" Brett asked.

Doc frowned, "I don't like abusers. Is she married?" he asked as he removed his coat and picked up his case.

"No, don't think so. She's not wearing a ring, and no indication that one had been there."

Brett knocked on Julie's door and led Doc in. Julie was awake and sitting up in bed.

"Doc, this is Julie Gilberts, my guest. Julie, this is Doc Adams, he's here to see how you are." Brett introduced them and left the room.

Julie sank against the headboard, shaking. She'd had a fear of doctors from the time she was born.

Doc Adams realized immediately that she was afraid. "Don't worry, I'm harmless," he said and

pulled a chair up to the side of the bed. He put on his stethoscope and leaned forward. "Let's have a listen to those lungs," he said as he placed the stethoscope on her chest.

While he was listening, he looked at the marks Brett had told him about. He finished the exam and turned to her.

"Tell me Julie, where did you get those bruises, they really look nasty," he asked.

Julie paled more if possible, and tried to pull the covers up over them. "Uh... I fell a few weeks ago," she lied.

Doc sat there and looked at her, then cleared his throat. "Julie, I've been a doctor for many years more than you've been alive. I know bruises and where you can get them when you fall. Those bruises weren't the result of a fall. I can see finger marks on your neck. If you don't want to tell me about it, that's your right, but I think you should trust me and let Brett and I help you," he told her.

Julie felt tears pricking her eyes. She willed herself not to cry and shook her head. "I really am fine."

Doc sighed and patted her hand. "You do have pneumonia though. You're run down and will need to rest for the next two weeks. I'm giving Brett a prescription to get filled for you. I want you to stay in bed as much as possible, no physical exertion. You need to eat more to build your strength. I'll check on you in a few days," he said.

As soon as he left the room, Julie felt tears once again rolling down her cheeks. She prayed that he wouldn't say anything to Brett. She couldn't stay here for two weeks, but how was she going to go anywhere without a car?

"You're right; she has bruises, but won't tell me how she got them. In fact she lied about them

when I asked. I had a bit of a talk with her, but I doubt she's going to tell either of us; she's just plain scared," Doc reported to Brett.

Shaking his head sadly, Brett asked, "How is she otherwise?"

"She has pneumonia. Two weeks of bed rest and this medicine I'm prescribing should help. She's run down, way too skinny, and needs to eat to build herself back up. I can ask Mary to come nurse her for you. I don't know what else to do with her, since she has no place to stay in town," Doc told him and handed him the script for the medicine.

"She is staying here," Brett stated firmly. He didn't know himself why he was so adamant about it, but he wanted her near him. "Mary Carlson would be great if she's available."

"I'll call her when I get home. She'll contact you. Maybe in time, she'll tell you what's going on, but I'd say she's running from someone who hurt her," Doc told him as he got ready to leave.

Chapter Two

Julie sank down into the bed after Doc Adams left. *What am I going to do? Think girl, this isn't the time to get sick.* Tears began to fall freely, and she fell asleep again, but the dreams were there waiting for her.

*You said I was all you'd ever need
Love is blind and little did I know
That you were just another dead-end road
They were pretty lies and broken dreams...*³

Julie gamboled up the steps to her new apartment in the old brownstone in Richmond. It was a gorgeous spring day, and life was good. At twenty-two and a recent college graduate, Julie had found her dream job, working in the governor's office. The pay wasn't much, but she wanted to pursue her political studies and maybe one day manage a major campaign, or even run for office herself. The whole world was ahead of her, and she had no worries.

Her father was a retired senator, living a quiet life in Alexandria. She'd been born late in his life. She didn't know where her mother was, but she'd

³ Lyrics from "I'd Sure Hate to Break Down Here" by Trace Adkins, "Comin' on Strong" Album

never known her, and had only vague memories from her toddler years. Vic Gilbert had seen to it that his daughter was well cared for and happy. He was very proud of her, and told her so often. This was now the first time really on her own, and she was relishing every moment of it.

Julie threw herself whole-heartedly into her new job. Soon she had many friends and was socially in high demand. Naïve as she was, she never dreamt that because of her name and her father, people might be out to use her to gain favor with him.

It slowly dawned on her, though, when one romance after another died after the man realized she wasn't going to use her father's influence. Her last horrid experience had been with a man five years her senior. His words had stung her, and hurt more than just finding out he didn't care for her.

"You're nothing without your father, Julie. It's time to grow up and realize that. I don't have time for naïve babies; go find yourself some slob who has no ambition."

That was the last she'd heard from Joe Ronson. Though she didn't want to be, she was devastated. Nothing her girlfriends told her seemed to help. It was time she decided to just not date anymore until she was more sure of herself and who *she* was.

She went home for a weekend to seek guidance from her father. He always knew the best way to handle things. Unfortunately, she arrived home to find an ambulance in the driveway and the housekeeper frantic.

"Oh Miss Julie, I'm so glad you're here. We've been trying to reach you all afternoon," she sobbed.

Julie paled and almost fainted but Frank Powell, her father's long time assistant, caught her and set her down.

"He's had a stroke, Julie. He's alive, but we don't know how much damage has been done. They're taking him to the hospital now, but it might be days before we know."

Julie nodded numbly and gratefully let Frank take her to the hospital. She doubted she could have driven in the condition she was in.

The stroke was bad. It didn't kill him, but robbed him of much of his ability to think and speak. He couldn't walk and was confined to a wheelchair.

Julie took a leave from work and stayed home to take care of him, along with the bevy of nurses they hired. After a month, Frank took her aside.

"Julie, it's time you left. Your dad isn't going to get better. The doctor wants him moved to a nursing facility where he'll get the best care he needs. You can, of course, visit anytime you want, but you need to get back to your life. I'll always be available anytime you need anything," he told her softly. He'd seen her grow up and felt like she was one of his daughters.

Julie was stunned, but nodded. "I guess you're right, but it's still such a shock. I can't believe I can't just go in and talk to him," she said, choking back the tears that came so easily every day.

"I know, but believe me, it's for the best. I know I'm a poor substitute, but you can come to me anytime you need anything, or just to talk." They hugged briefly, but Julie knew they'd grow apart in the near future.

Julie returned to Richmond much older and sadder than when she'd left.

She didn't know it, but she was ripe for the plucking of a man she would love with all her heart, until one fateful day. She felt that Robert George Parson was her soul mate and savior.

Brett checked on Julie and saw her tossing and turning in her sleep. If he wasn't mistaken, she was dreaming and it wasn't pleasant. He watched her for a while, then closed the door and went back downstairs. He was determined to find out a bit more about his houseguest.

He picked up the phone and dialed Abner Jones, an old family friend who happened to be a chief in the FBI. Abner himself picked up the phone.

"Hi Brett, this is a surprise. Hope it's not official business. Clifton Forge is way too small for anything major," he chuckled.

"No, sort of personal," Brett told him, and went on to explain about the storm and Julie. "So you see, something's wrong and she's not about to tell me. Anyway, can you run a quiet check on her? If she's running from someone who put those marks on her, I don't want them knowing about it, but I do want to know."

"Sure, give me a few hours. That name rings a bell, anyway," Abner told him and hung up.

Before he could make the next call, the phone rang, and it was Doc.

"Mary's free and said she'd be glad to come help nurse Julie. She'll be there tomorrow morning around seven, and will stay 'till whenever you get home."

"Thanks Doc, that's great!" Brett breathed a sigh of relief. Mary Carlson was one of the nicest women in Clifton Forge, and an expert nurse. She also had a way of finding out everyone's secrets. If anyone could get Julie to talk it would be her.

Julie woke feeling a bit better, but weak. She got out of bed, used the bathroom, and was about

to get dressed when the door opened and Brett came in with a tray.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked, a stern scowl on his face.

"I want to get dressed. I just can't stay here, I have to see about my car and get going. I'll be fine," Julie stammered, started grabbing her clothes, and headed toward the bathroom.

Before she was two feet away, Brett had picked her up and plunked her down in bed again. "You're going to stay right there! You are *not* going to get dressed. You are *not* going to see about your car. You're not leaving here."

"I have to, you don't understand? I have to go!" Julie started to get up again, but Brett sat down next to her, holding her down.

"I said *no*, Julie, and I mean it. Why don't you just tell me what's wrong. No one's going to hurt you here," Brett's voice was calm and soothing.

Looking into those deep blue eyes, and seeing the care and concern in them was too much. Julie slumped down and started crying. Deep, wracking sobs came up, choking her and making her cough.

Brett pulled her onto his lap. His arms and chest felt so comforting to her, they made her cry even harder. When she finally quieted, Brett led her into the bathroom and put a cool cloth on her face and neck.

"Feel better now?" he asked.

"Uh huh," Julie agreed.

"Okay, time for some food."

Brett put her back in bed and helped prop her up with pillows.

"I don't know that I can eat," Julie said.

"You have to, Doc's orders," he told her. "I don't think I'd go against his orders." He took the

tray to go heat it back up, and came right back minutes later.

Julie looked at the soup and scrambled eggs, and her stomach grumbled.

"I guess I am a bit hungry," she said as she started sipping the soup. Brett just watched quietly while she ate.

When the last of the food was gone, he asked her, "Care for more?"

"No thanks, I'm full." Julie yawned and sank back down on the bed.

"Sleep now for a while, and I'll check on you in a bit. Remember, you stay in the bed, young lady!" Brett said sternly.

Before he had gathered up the dishes and tray to leave, she was asleep.

After Abner hung up from Brett, he turned to his computer, typing the name Julie Gilbert into the private search engine.

A few minutes later he whistled under his breath and printed out four pages of documents. No wonder it sounded familiar, he thought to himself.

He did a few more searches and learned the name of the nursing home her father was in and the name of his assistant that was managing things for him.

Frank Powell was one of the most respected men in the political business, so at least her father was in good hands. He printed off a few more things before calling Brett.

Julie's dreams returned the moment she was asleep again. She dreamt about the day she'd met Rob.

She was sitting in the press office writing a speech for the governor, when a man came in and sat down across the table from her. She couldn't help but notice him. He was tall, blonde and had the build of an athlete. He could have been a quarterback for any college football team.

He looked up from his paper and smiled at her. The smile captivated her totally. It made his face light up, extending to his hazel eyes. She smiled back, then looked down at her speech, blushing slightly.

"My name's Robert Parson," he said, extending his hand.

"Hi, I'm Julie Gilbert," she responded, shaking his hand.

"Do you work for the governor or one of the local papers?" he inquired.

"I'm with the public relations staff for the governor. I'm working on a speech for his press conference," she replied and looked at the clock. "I'd love to chat, but I only have ten minutes to get this done and to his secretary."

"I'm running for the Senate and just stopped in to review some of the material here. The governor's backing me and said it might be helpful. I'll let you get back to work, but maybe we can have coffee or something after the speech."

Julie finished the speech and ran it down to the secretary, her mind very much on Robert Parson the entire time.

The governor loved the speech and after the conference, Robert took her out to dinner. It was the start of a wonderful romance that she thought would end in marriage and happiness ever after.

Brett looked in on her to see her sleeping more peacefully this time. Her dreams must be better because even though she tossed a bit, she had a smile on her face. He closed the door softly and went out to take care of the horses.

The phone rang as he was stomping the snow from his boots.

"Yeah, Sheriff Rowan," he answered.

"Abner here Brett, got some information for you. I don't know if you're ready for this or not."

"Shoot," Brett told him. He tucked the phone under his chin, poured a cup of coffee, and sat down.

"Miss Julie Gilbert is the daughter of retired US Senator Victor Gilbert, one of the most distinguished senators of our time, as I'm sure you know. He was advisor to the President himself, until his stroke a year ago. Now he resides in a nursing home, unable to walk or talk. His long time assistant is his guardian and trustee over Julia's trust fund, which is large as she's the only child of Gilbert's. Her mother hasn't been around in years, he never remarried, so she's one wealthy lady.

Julie has a political science and a journalism degree. Currently she's working for the governor in Richmond, a member of his public relations staff. There's been a bit of press surrounding her and our newest Senator, Robert Parson. It appears there're some rumors of an impending marriage, but no official announcement.

I can fax you all of it if you like, but that's the summary. Can't imagine what she was doing driving alone in a storm with a bag of clothes. Something doesn't sound right here, Brett." Abner waited for Brett's response.

Brett waited for a second, digesting all he'd learned. "Good work, Abner. You're right,

something doesn't add up. I can tell you she's definitely running from something and I'd say someone. Since she disappeared on the weekend, I wonder if she told anyone there she was leaving," Brett said, thinking out loud.

"No reports of her missing. I checked that," Abner told him. "Want me to do any further looking? Maybe check out this Parson guy. I've heard of him. He won big and has made quite a name for himself in Washington already. Seems some of the foreign oil types really like him."

"If you can, go ahead, but don't let anyone know where she is for now, okay?" Brett asked him.

"Will do, may take a few days, but I'll stick my nose in a few places. Hope she gets better and tells you what's going on." Abner hung up.

Brett sat there thinking for a few minutes, then went to check on Julie.

The next morning, Mary Carlson bustled into the kitchen as Brett was making coffee.

"Morning Mr. Rowan, how are you this lovely Monday?" Mary asked as she divested herself of coat, boots, scarf and gloves.

"I'm great Mary, and please call me Brett. You make me feel old!"

"Hush, you're just a pup, now why don't you take me to my patient, then I'll fix you a nice breakfast and send you on your way," she said with a smile.

Brett laughed and took her to meet Julie.

Julie was awake and sitting on the edge of the bed. Brett scowled at her and she scowled back.

"I was just using the bathroom," she said, glaring at him.

"Julie, this is Mary Carlson, she's going to nurse you and be here while I'm at work. She's the best nurse in all of Clifton Forge. Doc Adams has given

her instructions, so she knows what you're allowed to do," Brett said and smiled at the glum look on Julie's face.

"Mary, this is Julie Gilbert, my stranded motorist."

"How are you feeling this morning, my dear?" Mary asked as she shook down the thermometer and placed it in Julie's mouth.

A moment later she pulled it out and smiled. "Good, only a bit over 99. I'd say those antibiotics are working. Would you like to come down to the kitchen and eat? I think you could be allowed up that long."

Julie answered enthusiastically, "Oh yes, thank you!"

Brett handed her a robe and watched her walk a bit unsteadily from the room. As soon as they were in the kitchen, Mary poured tea for Julie and coffee for Brett.

"You two amuse yourselves while I fix breakfast," she announced.

Soon there were the most wonderful smells filling the room. Julie's stomach growled so loud that Brett laughed.

"I guess you're hungry!"

"Yes, guess I am. I do feel a bit better today," she told him. After a moment she looked at him and asked, "What can I do about my car? I really do need to get going as soon as I can. I can't stay here, I must go."

"Julie, I had your car towed to the garage and looked at. But, you're going to stay until Doc Adams releases you," he informed her.

Plates heaped with bacon, eggs, grits and toast halted any further conversation. Mary sat drinking coffee with them as they ate. Both Brett and Mary

were surprised to see Julie dig in and eat everything on her plate.

When they were done, Brett took the plates to the sink and then pulled Julie's chair out for her.

"Okay, time to get you back to bed. I have to get to work." His tone brooked no disagreement, so Julie sighed and followed him. He pulled the covers up around her and once again brushed her hair off her face and looked at the bruises.

Julie tried to turn away but he held her face gently but firmly in his hands.

"I do want to know who put those there Julie. Think about it, please," he said very softly.

Tears were once again pricking her eyelids and she felt one drip down her cheek. Brett wiped it away and surprising himself, kissed her gently on the forehead.

"Don't cry, I really want to help. It'll be okay, just take your time. Is there anyone you want to call? Anyone you want me to contact?"

Julie's eye grew wide. "No, no one at all, please don't," she squealed in a frantic voice.

"Okay, hush now and relax. I'll be back this afternoon. Behave for Mary." Brett rose and left the room.

All the way to work his mind played over her reactions and the information he'd learned from Abner. Something was terribly wrong in Julie Gilbert's world and if he wasn't mistaken, it would start catching up to her soon.

"Where the hell is she?" Robert Parson yelled into the phone at his assistant. "You were supposed to keep track of her."

"Look, I saw her go into her apartment Thursday night. She came out Friday and left for work, no

one's seen her since. I didn't think I needed to tail her all day," his frustrated assistant yelled back.

"Okay, let me think about this. She could be a walking time bomb. I've got to make some calls and see what the others want to do. Be ready to make an announcement to the press about her when I call you. I don't want anymore screw ups." Robert banged the phone down and started pacing his Washington office. Where in the hell is that bitch? Why couldn't she just keep her nose out of things and go along with me. "BITCH!" he said out loud and slammed a pen across the office.

After a moment, he picked up the phone and placed a call. The man on the other end of the line wasn't pleased with the news.

"What do you mean she knows, and now she's disappeared? Why on earth did you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her, she came for a surprise visit. We were meeting and I didn't know she was there... she overheard us. She didn't even say anything to me for a week, but then she demanded I get out. She refused to lend her name or her father's or endorse any of it. Let's just say I tried persuading her, and she ran," Robert cringed at the other man's reaction.

"Okay, so maybe it wasn't the brightest thing to do, but now 'we' have a real problem."

Robert listened for a bit, grimacing before he finally said, "Well if you think you can find her and make it look like an accident...go ahead. After all, she really meant nothing to me; I just needed her name to get here. She would have made a nice front as a wife, but there are lots of other fish in the sea. I'll leave it to you, after all that *is* your business."

When he hung up, Robert called the governor personally.

"Hi Sir, I'm really concerned about Julie. She hasn't answered any of my calls since Thursday. Did you send her somewhere?"

The Governor frowned when he heard what Robert had to say. "No Rob, I didn't. We got a phone message from her saying she was sorry, but she had personal business to attend to and would need to resign immediately. I don't know anything else. I've talked to Frank Powell, she isn't there and he doesn't know anything about it either. I'd say it's time we reported her missing."

Robert smiled. This was working perfectly. She left on her own, so any foul play would really not be connected to him at all. He breathed a sigh of relief and placed a call to the Richmond police.

Brett was enjoying being back in the office with the normal routine police business. He'd asked the garage to keep Julie's car inside, out of sight. For some reason, he had a hunch that trouble was going to come looking for her, and he didn't want to make it too easy.

Right after lunch he called Mary, "How's Julie doing?"

"She's fine. Slept quite a bit, but we got her showered and up some and that seemed to perk her up a bit," she reported. After a pause, she asked Brett, "Where did those nasty bruises come from? She has them all over her chest, too. I gave her some cream for them and she thanked me, but was close mouthed on where she got them."

"I don't know, Mary. Doc and I noticed the ones on her neck and face. I didn't know she had others. See if you can pry around a bit and find out. I think she's in big trouble and running, but too scared to let me help her," Brett told her.

"Okay, I'll put my best effort into it." Mary smiled and hung up. She wasn't Mary Carlson if she couldn't get that girl to talk to her.

Brett smiled thinking about Mary working on Julie. It was only a matter of time until they knew what drove Julie away from Richmond in a panic.

About two o'clock a deputy came in and put a fax on his desk. "I think you better look at this."

Brett glanced down and noticed it was a Missing Person Report. Normally he didn't get personally involved. When he read further he understood.

"So, my guest has been reported missing. I take it this Senator Parson is her boyfriend?" Brett asked Tom, the deputy.

"Seems that's what it says. The Governor has expressed his concern also. Said she left a message that she was resigning, so he is sure that she left voluntarily, but he's worried about her."

Brett took the paper and put it in his briefcase. "Let's keep this in this office for now. If there are any requests for information refer them to me. I think Julie is running from something, and until I know what, I don't want to let on she's here, okay?" he asked Tom.

"Sure, fine with me. I guess she didn't get those bruises you told me about by herself."

It was a bit early but Brett decided to pack up and go home. He first made a quick call to Doc Adams and requested that he too keep quiet about Julie's presence in town. When he got home he'd ask Mary to do the same.

Chapter Three

Mohammed Amman, Chief Deputy for a very large oil company, was not pleased with the turn of events that Senator Parson had relayed to him. The man was too young, immature and greedy. Not only would the girl have to be taken care of pronto, but something had to be done about the Senator. He was a danger to them all, including the other politicians they worked with. They couldn't afford to have any mistakes. Sighing, he picked up the phone and issued his orders.

An hour later, two men were on their way to Richmond to start locating Julie Gilbert. George Denato and Phillip Amici were hardened criminals and expert hit men. They'd never failed to execute their duty. This should be no different.

Completely unobserved, they entered Julie's apartment. Security was quite lax and the lock was easily picked. It was evident that she'd left in a hurry. Clothes were lying on the bed and drawers were left open. It almost looked like someone else had been there, but they saw no signs of another entry.

Carefully they checked through the desk and papers. Her address book and calendar were lying on top and they jotted down some names and phone numbers. It was evident she hadn't intended to leave...appointments were scheduled for the next several weeks.

From what they could tell she'd taken very little with her, not even a suitcase as there were several in her closet. Her answering machine yielded no clues at all. They'd have to get a record of her calls, which with their connections would be no problem.

Satisfied that they had as much as they were going to get, they left quietly, the same way they'd entered.

Once they reached the car parked several blocks away, George swung into the driver's seat. They sat for a moment and stripped their gloves off that they'd worn in the apartment. The police would find no trace they'd been there.

"Let's take a swing around front and see who's there. I bet Parsons has one of his flunkies watching the apartment to see if she returns," George said as he started the car.

"Guess you're right," Phil agreed as they spotted the car with a man sitting in it. They were almost past the building when two squad cars pulled up in front.

"Well, our friends in blue are here to see what they can find out. Looks like we made it just in time," George commented. "Let's get back to the motel and make some calls. See what leads we can get on her."

Mary Carlson quickly agreed with Brett, that it was necessary to keep Julie's presence here a secret.

"I won't tell a soul. Folks will know I'm on a case but they won't ask about it. If they do I'll tell them it's in the next town," Mary assured him.

"Thanks Mary, I knew I could count on you."

"There's something I need to tell you though before I go. I went to check on her this afternoon and she was sleeping. She moaned and thrashed about and before she woke up, she shouted out, 'No Robert, No, stop!' Then she woke up."

Brett frowned, feeling an anger he hadn't felt in a long time. "Thanks Mary, did she say anything when she woke up?"

"No, she had tears in her eyes, but said nothing. I asked her if she had a bad dream and she nodded. I'll try more tomorrow, but I didn't want to press too much."

Brett saw her out and went upstairs. He peeked in at Julie, but she was sleeping. Quietly closing her door, he went across the hall to shower and change. He was positive that Senator Parsons was the Robert she was talking about.

George smiled as he set the phone down. "She didn't call anyone, but she did use her credit card. She filled up late on Friday on Route 64. There's been a major snowstorm north of there... if she didn't turn off, she's caught. Care to see some of northwest Virginia?"

"Should be a piece of cake," Phil replied.

The phone records had shown no calls other than the one to the Governor's office. Checks on her credit card had followed. Her last fill up had been early Saturday morning. That meant she was either through the area or stuck. Since there were no other charges it was likely she was stuck.

"Okay, she should be around this area," Phil said and circled an area on the map that included Clifton Forge.

"Hard to say where she might be," George said. "She could have ditched the major roads. But, we know she can't go on alone, so we'll find her."

Julie woke feeling worse than she had earlier. She knew she'd been dreaming and also knew that she had to get away. As long as she was here and immobile, she was in danger.

Unfortunately, she had no way of escaping at the moment. She had to think and plan. Robert had power and influences far beyond her realm. She was determined that he would never sully her father's name. Why she'd ever thought he loved her, she'd never know. It was now her mission to escape, and in time reveal him for what he was. Her first step was to get away from here. She wasn't safe. How she was going to get away was another problem.

She lay there quietly trying to think, but her head was aching badly and her throat was worse. Her helplessness overwhelmed her and she broke into tears. It was the last thing she wanted but she couldn't control herself. Julie was sobbing and couldn't stop as all the horror of the past ten days flooded in.

Brett relaxed in the shower, thinking about Julie and not sure if he should confront her with the Missing Persons Report or not. He was still weighing the pros and cons as he dried off and slipped into his sweats. When he left the bathroom, he thought he heard the sounds of sobbing. His heart pounding, he ran to Julie's door.

"Julie, what's wrong?" he asked as he entered her room. Not waiting for a reply, he sat on the bed and pulled her into his arms.

Julie tried to stop crying, but just couldn't. She shook her head no and tried to pull out of his arms, but he held her tightly. Defeat closed in on her, and she slumped against him sobbing harder if possible.

"Shhh... tell me what's wrong," Brett softly told her.

Julie only cried for an answer. When she didn't calm after a few minutes, Brett picked her up and carried her downstairs. He sat in the rocking chair in front of the fire and rocked her like a baby. Finally she stopped.

"I'm sorry, I just lost control, I won't do it again," Julie said.

Brett just held her tight for a moment before responding. "Julie, I want you to tell me what's going on. I know you're sick... and if I'm not mistaken... you have another fever tonight... but there's something deeper bothering you. I need you to tell me, and tell me now."

Hearing the stern tone in his voice, Julie froze in fear. "No...nothing is wrong," she stuttered, her voice breaking.

"I know there is. You tell me now, young lady, or I may just turn you over my knee, and sick or not, spank it out of you. Remember, I'm an officer of the law, I have my sources of information," he said firmly.

"I...I...I can't," Julie murmured.

Brett looked down at the helpless bundle in his arms. "What am I going to do with you?" he asked her.

She didn't answer, and he didn't think she would. Making up his mind, he stood up, put her down in the chair, and left to get his briefcase. He came back a moment later to find her sniffing again.

Ignoring her distress, he picked her up and sat in the chair with her on his lap. In his hand he held the Missing Person Report.

"I got this today... name sounded familiar. Care to explain?"

Julie gasped. "Oh no... I have to go... I must leave," she said, shuddering.

Brett held her tightly against him. The more he held her, the less he ever wanted to let her go. "Julie, you aren't going anywhere, you're perfectly safe here. Now, I want to know what's going on."

"I can't ... I can't tell you. I just have to go," Julie replied.

"You aren't going anywhere, young lady, and if you don't stop thinking about it, I *will* spank some sense into you," Brett told her.

Julie didn't know what to do, but she thought quickly and came up with an answer she hoped he'd believe.

"I was in an unhappy relationship. It took a turn I didn't like, and I just decided to leave. I don't know why they did this... I called my job and resigned. I'm not missing, I just don't want someone to find me," she told him.

Brett knew there was far more to it than that, but let it go for the moment. "Okay, but you aren't going to leave here, understand? Your car is inside at the garage... no one knows you're here, so you *are* safe. Will you trust me?"

Julie shook her head. She wished she really could, but he had no idea the depth of her problem... and there was no way he could help.

"I'm going to fix some dinner. Do you want to go back upstairs or rest here?"

"I'll stay here if it's okay. I'd like to see the news," Julie said.

"That's fine, I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything."

Julie turned on the TV and few moments into the news broadcast, she screamed. Brett came running in from the kitchen in time to see her with her fist in her mouth staring at the screen.

A somber newsman was telling the world, "Victor Gilbert, retired United States Senator suffered another stroke this evening and died. According to his spokesman, Frank Powell, his only child, Julie Gilbert, has been reported missing and he hasn't been able to locate her."

Brett snapped the news off and sat down with Julie holding her. "I'm so sorry honey, do you want to go?"

"I...I...I can't. They'll kill me, I know they will," Julie said and again broke down in hysterical sobs.

Brett didn't know what to do with her, and all the excitement had caused her to relapse. He held her until she sobbed herself out and then laid her down on the sofa and called Doc Adams.

Doc shook his head at the phone. "I'll be right over. I'm giving her a sedative, and another shot. She's got to stay calm to heal."

Julie was still sleeping when Doc arrived. Brett left them alone and went back to the kitchen to finish dinner. Gently he woke her and Julie jumped startled.

"Let me check you over Julie, seems you've taken a turn for the worse here," Doc said gently listening to her lungs.

"You aren't any more congested, but we need to get this fever back down. I'm sorry for your loss, Julie, but remember, he's safe now and so are you. No one in town knows you're here. I need you to relax and get well. Let Brett help you," he said as he prepared the shots.

Julie flinched when he poked her but otherwise didn't fight him. "Okay, that should do the trick. I want you to eat some dinner, and then I'm leaving some pills with Brett. You need to take these for a while," Doc told her and stood up. He went to the kitchen to talk to Brett.

"She's still way under-nourished, but the bruises seem to be healing now. I'm leaving you some pills to help keep her calm. I'll be back on Friday to check on her again."

Dinner was ready, and Brett went to get Julie. She was sitting on the couch now looking lost and forlorn.

"Dinner's ready, and you need to eat something," he told her.

"I can't. I'm not hungry at all. I won't eat," she said stubbornly. "I have to leave here Brett, I really do."

Brett said nothing but scooped her up and carried her to the kitchen and plunked her in a chair. Julie didn't like his high handedness at all... and started to get up. She may have to stay here for now, but she was an adult and had a mind of her own.

Brett turned from the counter and saw her. He went over, gently pushed her back down, and leaned over her, effectively preventing her from getting up.

"If you so much as look like you're getting out of that chair, young lady, you *will* be out of it and over my knee, getting a paddling. Then, you'll sit back down on a very sore bottom and eat anyway. I don't like to be disobeyed. Understand?" Brett informed her in a steel laced voice.

Julie gasped and looked at him. "I really can't eat, and I don't see why you're trying to force me to. I'll just get sick."

"Julie, I know you are having a horrible time, but if you don't eat, you aren't going to get well. Now I want you to try and eat, okay?"

Julie nodded her head and sat back in the chair. "I'll try," she said.

"Good girl!" Brett answered, and went to dish her up some spaghetti and sauce. There was crusty bread on the table and he poured her some water. With the medications she was on, she couldn't have wine.

Brett sat down and talked, trying to keep the conversation light. Julie did manage to eat enough to satisfy Brett, but didn't add much to the conversation. After they were finished, Brett asked her, "Do you want to stay down here for a while, or go up to bed?"

"I'd really like to have some company, if it's okay," Julie told him. She didn't want to be alone in that bed, for more dreams to haunt her.

Brett cleaned up the kitchen, then popped a movie in and sat on the couch next to Julie. If he wasn't mistaken, she'd be asleep soon. Her eyelids were looking heavy and she was yawning.

Julie didn't understand it, but it felt so right sitting here with him. She relaxed and started to watch the movie. Before ten minutes were up, she was asleep and slumped against him. Brett put his arms around her and held her; he loved holding her, he realized, much more than was probably good. He wasn't ready to take her upstairs yet.

Once the movie was over, Brett carried her upstairs and tucked her in. Hopefully she'd sleep all night. Tomorrow he had to figure out what to do about the recent turn of events.

Frank Powell paced his office. He hadn't liked the men that had just left. Though they claimed they were detectives hired by George Parson to find Julie, he had a feeling they were far more than that. It wasn't like Julie to disappear like this. The national news had covered her father's death and he'd expected a call, but it hadn't come. There was only one answer; Julie was in serious trouble.

The men in question were sitting in their car reporting on their visit. "I think he's telling the truth. He doesn't know where she is and hasn't heard from her. We did manage to get a tap on his phone line, though. Slipped it in the phone on his secretary's desk when she left the room to announce us. If he hears from her, or anyone about her, we'll know," the swarthy man said, and listened for further instructions. He mumbled agreement and snapped the phone shut.

"Next stop is D.C. to take care of Parson."

"Supposed to look accidental, huh?" the other man asked.

"Yes, absolutely, but not for a week or two. Right now, we're just to get a feel for his habits and who he sees. The man's an idiot, letting a woman trip him up."

The next morning, Brett gave Mary the new instructions from Doc Adams before he left. Julie was still sleeping, and it appeared to be the most restful sleep she'd had since she'd arrived.

"Doc called me last night and told me, Brett. Don't fret now, I'll take good care of her," Mary assured him.

"I know you will, but don't let her get dressed and try to slip out. I'm afraid she's still going to run

at the first opportunity. If anything strange happens, call me right away," Brett informed her.

Once he got to the office, he called the garage. "Did you have a chance to look over the car I had towed in, Carl?"

"Yeah, it needed a few new belts, and other than being out of gas, is ready to go. Want me to gas her up and deliver her?"

"That would be great. Bring it around the back of the station, though. I'm going to house it in one of the garages here. And Carl, if anyone asks about it, you've never seen it, okay? Then let me know," Brett told him.

"Sure thing Brett. There were a couple of kids hanging around here ogling it yesterday, but they may not remember much. Is there trouble brewing?" Carl questioned with a tinge of worry in his voice.

"Don't worry, Carl, nothing the boys and I can't handle. Just don't want anyone knowing about the car," Brett replied.

Twenty minutes later, he had the car under a cloth in the police garage. Now it was safe from prying eyes, and safe from Julie also. He hadn't a doubt in his mind that she'd take off the first chance she got. That was not happening on his watch.

George and Phillip were approaching Clifton Forge. They'd checked all the other towns off the road, and so far there hadn't been any sign of her. Since she hadn't used her credit card, she was either carrying a large amount of cash or was hidden here somewhere.

"This sure is a small town," George commented.

"Yeah, Nowheresville," Phil replied.

George parked in front of the local real estate office and they got out and went in.

A pretty blonde was sitting behind the desk and smiled warmly at the two strangers.

"May I help you?"

Phil looked at her name plate and smiled back, "Sure can, Betsy, I'm looking for a friend who was going to rent a place here for a while. I haven't heard from her, and was wondering if there'd been any recent rentals here."

Betsy kept the smile on her face but there was something about these two men that bothered her. While Phil was talking to her, the other one seemed to be checking out every inch of the small office. It gave her the creeps.

"We really don't have many rentals here, and the ones we do have are empty at the moment. I haven't even received any inquiries for months. It's rare to rent them in the winter."

Phil motioned George over. "George, show Betsy the picture."

George pulled Julia's picture out and handed it to Betsy.

"Have you seen this woman? She's my boss's fiancée and apparently they had a spat and he's looking for her," Phil told her glibly.

Betsy took the picture and looked at it. She'd never seen the woman but it looked familiar somehow. She handed it back.

"No, haven't seen anyone like that here at all. In fact, since the storm last weekend, there hasn't been anyone in town that doesn't live here. Sorry I couldn't help you," she said.

Phil thanked her, and they were leaving, when Betsy called to them. "You might try the Sheriff's office. If anyone were stranded in the storm, he'd

know. Could be the state police took them somewhere for safety."

As they pulled away in their car, Betsy ran to the window and wrote down the license plate number and description of the car. Then she wrote down their description as best as she could. She'd remembered where she'd seen the woman before... she was on the TV the other night...reported missing.

Betsy thought for a moment then picked up the phone and called her husband.

"Clifton Forge Sheriff's Department," the operator said.

"Hi Helen, this is Betsy, is Tom there?"

"He's with the Sheriff; shall I ring in there?"

Betsy thought for a moment. "Yes, I think you should."

Tom frowned when Helen told him Betsy had to talk to him.

"Sorry Brett, seems my wife has something urgent to tell me," Tom said as he picked up the phone.

"What's up, Betsy?" Tom asked.

He listened intently then said into the receiver, "Hang on a sec."

"Brett, I think you should hear this." He handed the phone to Brett.

Brett listened then said. "Thanks Betsy, you did the right thing. If they come back give us a call right away," Brett hung up.

"Let's run this plate right away. If I'm not mistaken those were no ordinary P.I.'s."

Tom nodded. "This have anything to do with your houseguest and the car in the garage?"

Brett laughed, "It might, but keep that under your hat for now. We could have a spot of trouble headed our way. Send a few of the boys out to see

if they can find this car. Don't stop them, just keep an eye on them."

"I'll go out myself. I want to stop by and make sure Betsy is okay, too."

Tom told the desk sergeant that if anyone came in making inquiries about a woman, to call Brett, and then he left. He'd barely buckled himself into his squad car before the men in question pulled into the parking lot. Smiling, he got back out and followed them inside.

They were talking to the desk sergeant and Tom stayed out of sight.

"I'll get the sheriff; if anyone knows, he would," Sgt. Clifford told them.

Tom waited until the sergeant was gone then walked in and sat down at the nearest desk, pretending to read some papers on it. He wanted to hear exactly what was said.

Brett came up to the desk and introduced himself. "What can I do for you?" he inquired of the two.

"We're looking for a woman, had a spat with our boss and took off. He's concerned about her, hasn't heard from her in days. Thought maybe she stopped here during the storm," Phil told him, and showed Brett Julie's picture.

Brett made a pretense of studying it. "No, haven't seen her at all. No one new in town since the storm, or several days before for that matter," he said handing the picture back.

"I can make a call to the State for you, but I'd like to see some ID, and have your boss's name," Brett told them.

George and Phil exchanged a quick glance and slowly both brought out their licenses.

"Boss is Robert Parson," Phil told Brett.

"Ok, have a seat and I'll put in a quick call to state," Brett told them and took their licenses with him. He motioned for Tom to come with him.

"I'll run the licenses, check with state for any criminal background."

Five minutes later they had what they needed. No outstanding warrants but enough priors to cover two sheets on each.

Brett went back out and handed them the licenses. "Sorry, no report at all, the only travelers they rescued were kept in the next town overnight and as soon as the roads were clear the next day they were on their way."

"Thank you, Sheriff," Phil said, and they left the station.

Chapter Four

Brett sat back in his chair thinking after George and Phil left. Tom had gone on his way again to check on Betsy.

After a few minutes, he picked up the phone and called Abner.

"Jones here," Abner answered.

"Hi Abner, need some more help and fast." Brett told him what had just happened.

"I saw the missing person report come through. Strange too, since the governor doesn't seem to consider her missing, just left on her own. Frank Powell didn't file it, Parson did. I thought it odd," Abner said and paused before continuing. "Let me fill you in on what I've found out and then we'll talk about what happened this morning."

"Robert Parson has a lot of ties to the Middle East oil cartels. He's been seen meeting in hotels and in his home with them regularly. When questioned about it, he brushed it off as entertaining, nothing more. However, there was a big vote two weeks ago and he was instrumental in getting it passed favorably for the cartels. Guys here think Senator Parson has been bought and paid for. He comes from a good family name, but they're virtually broke and his lifestyle's pretty high. One source said he was trying to get Julie Gilbert to lend her name... or her father's name to one of his promotions. I doubt he has a clue, but he's under

heavy scrutiny. He's dirty, Brett, as dirty as they come," Abner finished up.

"That doesn't surprise me at all Abner, and I think he's the one who put the bruises on Julie's neck. Now, have you ever heard of these two guys? They're the ones that were asking about Julie. They have rap sheets a mile long. George Denato and Phillip Amici were the names on the licenses."

"Give me a sec." Abner came back to the phone whistling. "Julie Gilbert is in serious trouble, Brett. They're big time goons for the mafia and are probably tied up in the oil business as well. I hope you make sure she doesn't move from your house," he said.

"No, she isn't going anywhere, but we do have another problem. I'm sure you heard her father died. Frank Powell has said he has no idea where she is, but it wouldn't surprise me if these guys weren't watching him. I know Julie wants to go to the services, but that's impossible now. Any suggestions? I was thinking of calling him, but the line could be tapped."

"No, don't call him. I think I'll go pay him a visit with a crew myself. Make sure there're no bugs in the place and then we can talk to him. I'll arrange for him to contact you soon. I'll let you know how it goes," Abner told him, and hung up.

Phil and George sat in the restaurant eating lunch and talking quietly about their visit with Brett Rowan.

"He seemed pretty cagey to me. Almost like he knew something he wasn't saying," said George.

"Nah, he's just a small town cop. Friendly and dumb; what D.C. cop would ever be that helpful? She's not shown her face here, that's for sure. We'll

just have to keep looking further down the road. Maybe she made it through here before the storm hit. I'll have her credit card checked again. If nothing's on that, she's using cash," Phil responded.

Both ate quietly and thought about what they were going to do to her for their efforts when they found her. She wouldn't enjoy it that's for sure, but they would, and then bury her where no one would ever find her.

Suddenly George grabbed Phil's arm. "Listen to the kids at the counter."

"Man, I'd love to get in that thing and take a spin. What a neat car. Never saw that around before, wonder whose it is? Maybe we should see if Carl will tell us," a tall pimply kid said.

"Yeah, after here, let's go back and take another peek. I love red cars," the other teen said.

Phil and George got up, threw some money on the table and walked over to the boys.

"I couldn't help overhearing your conversation," Phil told them. "I have a friend I'm trying to locate that drives a red car, wonder if it's hers?" Phil described the car to the two of them.

"Wow, sure sounds like it!" they said in unison.

"I'm trying to surprise my friend, would you do me a favor?" Phil asked, and showed the kids a \$100 bill.

"Sure, for that!"

"Talk to Carl, and then come to our car over there," Phil told him and pointed, "and let me know what he says."

"You got it," the two responded and flew from the diner.

"Hey Carl," they called out as they entered the garage. "Where's that red car?"

Carl laughed at them, "It's gone guys, sorry."

They look crestfallen and then the younger one asked, "Who owns it? Maybe we can talk them into letting us take it for a ride."

"You know I can't tell you that, now go on and get," Carl yelled at them, shooing them from the garage.

He watched them run across the street, and lean into a car and speak to two men. Clear as day, he saw them get some money and run off. Frowning, he picked up the phone and dialed Brett.

"Hey Brett, those kids were back here looking for the car. They wanted to know who owned it, then when I shooed them off, they went to a strange car and talked to two men. One man gave them money. Doesn't look good to me, and now they're on the way in here," he said and hung up.

Brett swore; he wanted those two gone, and now they were suspicious enough to stick around.

Tom had just come back, so Brett yelled to him, "Go over to Carl's. Looks like our two guys are there. Some kids told them about the car and were paid. Could be trouble for Carl."

Tom ran out the door and pulled up to Carl's just as Phil and George stood questioning Carl.

"I understand you worked on a red car yesterday? It sounds like a friend of mine's, I'd like to know where it is now?" Phil asked in a threatening manner.

"I can't divulge that information," Carl told him calmly.

"Problem here, gentlemen?" asked Tom.

"They want to know who owns the car I worked on yesterday. Don't want to take no for an answer," Carl told him, secretly relieved to see him.

"That old red one?" Tom asked, laughing,

"Yeah that one," Carl said.

"Well guys, that's my dad's. He was visiting from D.C. and got stuck in the storm. Had it checked out for him and he left this morning."

Phil glared but he and George left.

"Thanks Tom, I don't know what would have happened."

"Let's dummy up a receipt for me and destroy Brett's. I have a feeling you're going to have a break in tonight," Tom told him.

When Tom left the garage with a wave to Carl, he noticed that Phil and George were parked around the corner. These two were sure trouble.

Abner Jones made a few phone calls and soon he and two other agents were on the way to Frank Powell's home.

As they pulled up in the circular driveway, Abner checked out the cars on the street. Sure enough, a car was parked a bit down the road, but still had a view of the house. Two men were in the front seat.

"Looks like Mr. Powell has a surveillance team on him, and it isn't the police or us," Abner commented to the other two.

"I picked that up," said the driver, one of the best undercover agents the FBI had.

They were shown into Frank's office. While they were waiting, the other two agents searched the offices for bugs. Sure enough, there was a tap on the secretary's phone that would successfully record all incoming and outgoing phone calls. No other bugs were detected, so it would be safe to talk in the office.

Frank Powell came in and shook hands with the agents. "How can I help you gentlemen?"

Abner took the lead. "I know where Julie Gilbert is, but it isn't safe for her to reveal herself or for anyone to know of her whereabouts."

Frank leaped out of his chair. "Where is she? I need to talk to her immediately!" he almost shouted at Abner.

"Please Mr. Powell, I'll tell you all I know, but it isn't possible for you to call or talk to her from your home. It appears your phones have been bugged. I'll arrange for you to talk to her in a bit. I need your cooperation in this, though," Abner said calmly.

"Is she hurt?" Frank asked, concern filling his voice.

"She's ill, but receiving excellent care. Her car broke down and she was caught in the blizzard in Clifton Forge, Va. The local sheriff found her and took her to his home. She's there still, with pneumonia, under a doctor's care and is recovering. No one else in the town knows she's there, other than the sheriff, a deputy, the doctor and a nurse. However, two men who said they were hired by Robert Parson to find her were there today asking questions and showing her picture around," Abner told him.

Frank flinched at the mention of Robert Parson. "I don't like that young man at all. He's slimy in my opinion. I wish Julie hadn't gotten hooked up with him."

"I'm glad you feel that way, because it appears that Julie was beaten rather badly before she disappeared. She refuses to tell the sheriff why she's running, but she's really scared. He feels that she's a flight risk. When she heard her father had died and they have a missing person's alert on her, she wanted to leave. Actually had a relapse, with the emotions and all," related Abner.

"What can I do to help her?" asked Frank.

"Senator Parson's believed to be involved in a bribery/payoff scam with some Mideast Oil Cartel. I think Julie knows about it, and threatened to reveal it. She knows she's in danger, but didn't want her father's name involved with any of it, so she ran. I need you to get her to come forward and talk. That will save her life. Once the news is out, she can't do anymore harm to them. They'll be the ones running from her."

"I'll do anything for her. You're right, she must come forward, but how can I get to her, without them following me?"

"That's what will need some planning. I don't know yet, but I do know Brett Rowan, the sheriff that's protecting Julie, wants to talk to you. He's an old family friend and as trustworthy as they come. I'm going to call him now and put you on. Is that all right with you?" Abner pulled his cell phone from his pocket.

"Yes, it's fine," Frank responded and stood and walked to his window. "You know that car has been out in the street all day. It seems strange to me."

"You have surveillance, and it's not the good kind," Abner told him.

Tom reported immediately to Brett what he'd encountered at Carl's. "I'm pretty sure they would have roughed him up if I hadn't arrived. They were awful nasty looking. I have your receipt here, and we dummied up one for me. Doubt they really believed it though. They're still sitting around the corner from his shop. Doesn't look to me like they have any intention of leaving anytime soon."

"They'll be back in there as soon as they can, ransacking the place. Put two guys on it... the

minute they come out... arrest them. They can cool their heels for a bit, then I'll let state come and get them. That should take care of them for a bit," said Brett.

Tom left to put things in motion and Brett called Mary. He was really concerned about Julie since his conversation with Abner. If what Abner thought was true, she would try and run as soon as she could. He had to make sure she didn't step out of that house.

"Hi Brett, she's been a bit weepy today. I put some more salve on her bruises and managed to get her to tell me that her ex-boyfriend beat her up. I tried for more, but all I got out of her is she's afraid she'll be killed and has to get away. Stopped just short of asking me to help her do it. I think that's next though," Mary reported.

"Thanks Mary, keep a close eye on her," Brett requested.

He was deep in thought thinking of how to get Julie to open up so he could help her, when the phone rang.

"Sheriff Rowan," he said.

"Hi Brett, this is Abner. I have Frank Powell here, so you can talk to him. His phones are bugged and a car's watching his house," Abner told him and handed the phone to Frank.

"Sheriff, I understand Julie is with you. Is she all right?" Frank asked immediately.

"She's sick, but unharmed, and I intend to see she stays that way. I need your help though in getting her to talk to me. I've tried everything but she's stubbornly refusing to talk. She did admit to the nurse today that her ex-boyfriend beat her... and is afraid will kill her and she needs to get away," Brett said and waited for a reply.

"I'll do anything I can. I wish I could see her, but we haven't figured out how yet. I'll cover her absence at her father's funeral with the press, somehow. It's going to be private anyway, with a memorial service later. Mr. Jones is trying to figure out a way to get me to her. If I had a clear line I'd call her," Frank said.

"Let me talk to Abner, maybe we can come up with a way."

"Thanks for helping her, Sheriff," Frank said and passed the phone back to Abner.

"Give me some time Brett, I'll call you at home tonight," Abner told him and hung up.

Brett decided to call it a day and headed for home. Julie was concerning him a lot. He hoped that Abner would figure out a way to get Frank to see her, or at the very least to talk to her.

Mary had nothing new to report when he relieved her. "She's napping again, but she's been awfully restless today. Her fever's back down, so that's a good sign. Maybe I can get more out of her tomorrow, but somehow I think she's determined not to say anything more," Mary told him, and chuckled. "It's not many people I can't crack."

"That's okay Mary, I think we're close to getting her to talk anyway. See you tomorrow," Brett told her and showed her to the door.

He changed clothes and checked on Julie. She was sleeping and appeared peaceful. Now he only had to wait for Abner to call.

Phil and George only left their surveillance spot to get dinner. As soon as they could, they were going into that garage and getting the receipt they

were after. Both were positive that the cop was lying through his teeth and they weren't going to let anything stop them.

They'd reported in and had been informed that the other team was in D.C. on Parson, and Frank Powell apparently knew nothing and hadn't received any calls. A bug was in place so if he made or received any phone calls from her or anyone about her, they'd be alerted immediately.

"How late do you want to wait?" George asked Phil.

"Not too much longer; it's dark, but there's still a bit of traffic. You know these hick towns; it will be pretty much deserted by 7:30. We're in and out, and in the next town before anyone can spot us," Phil replied and chuckled. "These guys are so stupid!"

Tom and two of his deputies had Carl's garage staked out. They were hidden at both entrances...front and back, and Tom was inside, hiding in the bathroom. It was almost 8:00 and he didn't think it would be long now.

Abner was back in his office, reviewing the case with the two operatives and several other masterminds on his staff.

After several suggestions and refusals, they came up with a plan. They had left one of the cell phones with Frank and told him they would call him on it, as soon as they had something.

"I have an idea," one of the agents said, "We can use the double trick."

Abner motioned for him to continue. "Tell us exactly what you'd do."

"We could have someone call from White House... say the President's sending a limo for him

for the funeral services. They'll pick up the call... not think much about it when the limo shows up. Once he's at the service he can mingle, be visible then shortly before it's over, he can be summoned to the office to take a phone call. We find someone who resembles him enough, in general build, and we can do a wig and mask if needed. An aid can announce that he's been called away on an emergency and sends his apologies. The limo can leave with the decoy in it and return home. Perhaps make some phone calls that can be tapped concerning another business matter."

"In the meantime, the real Frank Powell, will be disguised... wig, glasses, fake frame under a coat, making him look bigger. He'll be seen leaving the service with a female operative posing as his wife. They'll get in a car and drive off. Take him to a private airfield and helicopter him to some place near Clifton Forge. Have him met and driven to the Sheriff's house," the agent finished and looked around for reaction.

The room was quiet for a full 10 seconds, then Abner clapped his hands. "You sir, get the prize, that's wonderful. Okay folks, get the details planned, we only have three days to get this set up. I'll call Frank and let him know, then let Sheriff Rowan know. He can help arrange things from his end," he said and left the room dialing his cell phone.

After calling Frank, he called Brett. "Hi, we have a plan," Abner launched into the details.

"This is the phone number he can talk at, it's a cell and it's clear. I think you should have him talk to Julie. We need to get her to start helping here. I'll check with you in the morning," Abner said and hung up.

Brett went upstairs to see if Julie was awake. When he entered the room, she sat up halfway and smiled. "I feel lots better, I think I'm well," she said.

"Oh, I think you're getting there but far from well," Brett told her. "Do you want to come down for dinner?"

"Yes, I would. Can I get dressed? I think it would feel good," Julie asked.

"Hmmm, wait until Doc checks you, but yeah I'd love your company at dinner. Need any help?"

Julie frowned. "No, I'm fine, really. I think I'll take a shower though," she said.

"Ok, but Julie, if you need help, holler," Brett added and left.

Julie sat there for a minute then headed for the shower... maybe she couldn't escape during the day... but now was perfect.

She turned on the shower and let it run for a bit, then found her clothes and dressed. She had to sit down and rest a minute... it was unbelievable how tired she got. Once dressed, she crept down the stairs and made sure Brett was in the kitchen. He was humming to himself while he cooked, and never heard her. Very quietly, she opened the front door and left. In no time, she'd saddled a horse and was on her way... to where she had no idea.

Brett was busy making a salad and hadn't paid too much attention to the time. He was finished when it dawned on him that the shower had been running for a very long time. Something wasn't right.

"Julie, are you okay?" he called into the bathroom. No answer. He tried again and still no answer. Opening the door, he swore when he saw

the bathroom empty. A quick survey of her room showed she'd dressed, taken her purse and was gone. Either she'd taken his car, which he doubted, or was on foot or horseback.

"Damn that woman," he shouted into the air as he ran to the barn. "When I catch her, she'll not sit for a week!"

Immediately he saw she'd taken one of the mares. He saddled Blackie and left. Trailing her was easy, since there was still snow on the ground and tracks even in the dark were easily visible. It was only a matter of minutes before he saw her ahead of him. He halted Blackie and whistled. The mare she was riding was trained to come to him at that signal.

Julie was exhausted but happy that she was finally on her way somewhere to safety. She had just begun to relax, when she heard the whistle. Quickly she tried to urge the horse forward only to be shocked when it turned and galloped toward the whistle.

"Well, well, well, what do we have here?" Brett asked sarcastically when he grabbed the reins of Julie's horse.

"Please Brett, I have to go, please?" Julie begged.

"There's only one place you're going right now, and that's back home with me," Brett said as he swept her off the horse and placed her in front of him. Her horse would follow them back home.

Julie was already shivering, her coat no more protection for her now, than it had been last week. She tried talking to Brett and explaining all the way back to no avail. He was silent and didn't say a word.

When they arrived home, he put her down and attended to the horses, all the time keeping an eye

on her. As soon as he was finished, he grabbed her arm and led her inside.

"I want to know, what in the world you were thinking, young lady?" Brett asked.

"I'm going upstairs; it's none of your business," Julie responded, sticking her chin up and starting to leave the room. She was surprised at how fast he could move.

"Oh, I think it's a *lot* my business," Brett informed her as he grabbed her arm, quickly pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down. Before Julie could protest, her jeans and panties were on the floor and she was over his knee... bare bottomed.

"You've been asking for a good spanking for days, and now you've more than earned one," Brett said and began smacking her bottom hard from cheek to cheek.

Julie gasped and tried to get free, only to have him lock her legs with his. "You aren't going anywhere little lady, not until you explain what this is all about. I'm out of patience," Brett growled all the while smacking her.

Julie didn't know what to do. She'd never in her life been spanked... and this hurt! Soon she was pleading with him to stop. Brett didn't listen and continued spanking until she finally broke down sobbing.

He pulled her up into his arms and held her tight. "Julie, I want to know what made you run."

Julie sobbed into his shoulder, shaking her head from side to side, saying nothing.

Brett sighed, rubbed her back and planted soft kisses on her head until she calmed some. When she was barely sniffing he held her tight against him and talked quietly in her ear.

"I don't want to have to spank you more, Julie, but I will. This is over as of now. I know a good

deal of the story already, but I need you to tell me the rest. It'll be over, when you tell me. I have protection for you arranged. Now, Julie!" Brett said and waited for her to talk.

When she remained mute he started tipping her back over his knee. That was all it took.

"No, please, don't beat me anymore! Please, I'm scared," Julie cried.

"I'm not beating you Julie, I'm spanking you. There's a big difference. I'm doing this because I care about you. More than I should, probably, but I can't help that. Spanking doesn't leave bruises, like you have from the man who *did* beat you. I'm fairly sure it was Robert Parson. Now tell me in your words what happened."

"I'm so afraid Brett! I just don't want to be hurt," Julie whispered and started crying again.

Brett held her tight and waited until she was calm again. Then he tilted her chin up and looked her in the eyes, telling her, "I promise you Julie, I *will* protect you. I lost one woman I loved dearly and don't plan on losing another. You're safe with me and always will be.

"What do you mean? You said you love me?"

Brett sighed; leave it to her to pick up on that, and not hear the rest.

"Yes, Julie, I do. I don't know how it happened or why, but I think I fell in love with you the first day I pulled you out of that car. But that can all be worked out later, right now it's important that you trust me, and tell me what happened," Brett told her, rubbing the tears out of her eyes with his thumb.

Julie sat there shaking and silent still.

"Your time is running out Julie, I'll go get the hairbrush and continue where I left off," Brett said sternly.

“No, please, I’ll tell you.” With tears in her eyes, Julie sighed and began to relate her tale.

Chapter Five

It was finally dark, and the streets of Clifton Forge were deserted. Phil and George pulled up in front of the garage, pulling on black hoods and gloves. Silently, they picked the lock and entered the office. They waited a moment, then took out their flashlights and began to explore.

"Here's the receipt file," said Phil, holding up a folder he pulled from underneath the counter.

"Good, there're some neat tools here I think we can use. I'm loading up on those, then let's mess it up some," added George.

Phil worked on the counter, looking through the receipt file. When he didn't find the receipt he was after, he threw the contents all over the floor and pried open the cash drawer. There was only about two hundred dollars but he stuffed those in his pocket and took the credit card copies and scattered them.

"I think we've been here long enough; let's go," Phil yelled to George.

George joined him with an armful of tools and a tool bag full of more. "Okay, let's hit the next town," he said.

Tom was almost laughing listening to them. He stepped out of the bathroom with his gun drawn. "Evening, what brings you boys here?" he asked them with a big grin on his face.

Phil and George spun around and tried to grab their guns, but the other deputies burst into the

room and surrounded them. Before they could react, they were handcuffed and relieved of their ill-gotten goods.

Tom slowly pulled the hoods off. "What a surprise, our two men looking for the missing woman. I don't think she's here boys," he said snidely. "Read them their rights, and lock them up. The sheriff can deal with them in the morning."

Tom got back in his car and laughed before pulling out his cell phone to dial Brett.

Brett felt himself tense as she talked; he knew deep down all along that it was Parson she was running from, and that he was the one who'd beat her. Now he was hearing proof of that, and also of Abner's suspicions. No wonder she was in serious trouble. No doubt more people than Parson were looking for her.

The phone ringing interrupted his thoughts and he reached in his pocket for it as he held Julie tight.

"Brett here," he answered.

"Hi Brett, this is Tom. You have some guests in your jail for the night. Seems our two visitors this afternoon were very interested in the receipts at Carl's place, along with the contents of the cash register and some tools," Tom reported.

"Good, they can just have a nice rest until I'm ready to deal with them. Make sure they keep a close watch on them though. I don't want them out," Brett said and hung up.

Julie had calmed and was looking at him, eyes wide with her hand in her mouth. "They're here aren't they? They're looking for me?"

Brett took her hand out of her mouth and gave her some wine to sip. "There were two men in town today asking questions about you and showing your

picture around. They weren't able to find anyone who knew you, or had seen you. They even showed up at the station asking me, pretending concern that you'd been lost in the blizzard. Apparently they overheard two kids talking at the diner about your car, and went and asked Carl about it. They got a bit tough and Tom showed up and threw them out. Your car's in the police garage locked up, under a tarp where no one'll see it," Brett told her.

"Then why are they in jail now?"

"Because they didn't believe Tom when he told them the car the boys had seen was his Dad's. When they left, it was obvious they didn't believe him, so Carl destroyed the receipt I had and they made one up for Tom. They broke into the garage tonight looking for it, and robbed the place. We had it staked out so there're witnesses; should keep those two busy for a long time. Now, are you ready to finish?" Brett asked her.

"I guess," Julie stammered, still clearly afraid. "When he found out I'd heard, he went crazy. Told me I was to forget everything I'd heard and that I was going to back his proposal the very next day. I refused and told him I was calling Frank to tell him. I never saw it coming, but he started punching and hitting me until I fainted. When I woke up he was asleep. I got up as quietly as I could and left. My mind was a jumble as I drove. I almost went to Frank's, but then I thought he'd be in trouble, too. I went home and locked all the doors and put the deadbolts on. I threw whatever I could in a bag; I was so scared I didn't want to even go to my locker room for a suitcase. Then I called and left a message for the governor, that I was resigning. I knew it was only a matter of time before Robert would try and get in touch, and would have someone watching me. I fell into an exhausted

sleep and woke to the phone ringing. It was Robert, telling me to get back there at once. That we were going public that afternoon. I hung up on him, and looked outside... sure enough, one of his flunkies was sitting there. I left the radio on and grabbed my purse, a coat and the bag and snuck out the back way. I never looked back. I had no idea where I was going; I just drove and stopped to rest when I couldn't go any further. The next thing I knew the car was acting up and I was in this blizzard and out of gas. You found me," Julie finished and slumped against Brett's chest, softly crying.

Brett could barely contain his emotions. He'd never felt such a cold fury against any man in his life. Robert Parson was very lucky he wasn't there at the moment.

"Julie, it's going to be fine. I've already gotten help. We need to have something to eat and then I have something that'll make you feel better, okay?"

"I'm not hungry, Brett. Why can't I just go, before they hurt you?" Julie squirmed in his arms.

Brett glowered at her. "I told you, you're not going anywhere and you're safe here with me. They don't know where you are. These two were trying to find out something and met with a dead end. They'll be in state custody by this time tomorrow and out of town. Now, you *are* going to eat," Brett said, put her on her feet, grabbed her hand and took her to the kitchen.

He made sure she had some salad and chicken, and noted happily that there was now color in her cheeks. Leaving the dishes in the sink, he took her back in the living room and sat her on his lap again.

"Ready for your surprise?" he asked, smiling.

"It's not a spanking, is it?" Julie asked worriedly.

"No, but Lord knows you deserve one," Brett replied and dialed the phone number Abner had given him.

"Evening, this is Brett Rowan again, I have someone here who would love to talk to you," Brett told Frank Powell and handed a bewildered looking Julie the phone.

"*Julie*, are you all right? I've been frantic with worry about you," Frank asked her.

Huge tears began to run down Julie's face but she leaned back against Brett before replying, "Oh Frank, I've been so scared. They're trying to kill me and I got sick, but Brett's been taking care of me and says I'm safe. I'm sorry I couldn't be there for my Dad. I don't know what to do," Julie told him.

Frank breathed a sigh of relief. "Julie, I want you to listen to Brett and do what he says. I know all about Robert, at least what the FBI told me. I'll wait until I see you to hear your side totally, but did you know what he's involved in?"

"I was upset with him a week or so before I left, but only really knew the night before. I surprised him with some of his cronies. He beat me up, Frank!" Julie sobbed into the phone.

"Julie, honey, it's going to be okay, I'm going to make sure of it. I'm trying to get there soon, but we don't know when that'll be. You need to do exactly what Sheriff Rowan tells you to. I'll be in touch soon. Let me talk to Brett now, please," Frank told her.

"He wants to talk to you," Julie handed Brett the phone and lay back against his chest, savoring the arm that held her tight.

Brett assured Frank that he would indeed take care of her, and would be in touch with Abner.

Julie lay against Brett's chest as he talked to Frank. The sound of his voice resonating from within, his steady even heartbeat, along with the security of the arm that held her, lulled her into a relaxed deep sleep.

Brett smiled down at her when he got off the phone, realizing she was sound asleep. He decided to just hold her there for a while and then he'd tuck her in. It felt so good to him to have her in his arms asleep against his chest. When she was well and this mess was cleared up, he'd have to work on a relationship with her. Right now she was too vulnerable to proceed with anything close to a romance.

She continued to sleep soundly against him and when it was time for bed he carried her upstairs, helped her undress, put her nightgown back on and tucked her in bed. He left the nightlight on in the bathroom and went downstairs to lock up. She was still sleeping soundly when he checked on her before he went to bed.

At three a.m. he heard a scream and jumped from bed, racing to Julie's room. She was sitting on the edge of the bed sobbing.

"Julie, what's wrong?" he asked her soothingly, crouched in front of her.

"I know they're coming... I have to get away... they'll kill me and Frank and you... and everyone," she sobbed, trying to get up.

Brett stood up and sat on the bed, resting against the headboard, and pulled her onto his lap. "Julie, I told you they won't get you, or anyone else. You have to listen to what I say and what Frank told you. You *are* safe; you just had another bad dream," he told her, rocking her in his arms.

Julie quieted to sniffles but wasn't relaxed. Brett could tell she was still tense and figured she was still thinking of running.

"Don't even think about running away again, young lady! I meant what I said. You won't sit for a month comfortably."

Julie looked at him and smiled a bit. "I'm so scared and the dream was so awful," she said and sighed. relaxing again.

Brett held her for a bit rubbing her back, until she was calm again. "Okay, you need to get some more sleep," he said putting her back in bed.

"No, please don't leave me. I'll just have the dream again," Julie begged.

Brett frowned. He shouldn't be this close to her in bed. "Julie, I shouldn't be here, in bed with you."

"Please Brett, just hold me. I feel safe when you do."

With a deep sigh, hoping he wouldn't regret it, Brett lay down next to her and pulled her into his arms. In a few minutes she was sound asleep and he was able to fall back to sleep himself.

The sound of the alarm ringing in his bedroom woke him. Getting up carefully so he didn't wake her, Brett left to shower and dress for work. The aroma of fresh made coffee and bacon met him when he stepped from his room. His first thought was that Mary was awfully early. He stopped in shock when he entered the kitchen to see Julie in her robe fixing breakfast.

"I left you asleep; what are you doing up?" he asked.

"I woke up and was hungry. I feel pretty good, so I decided to get up and make breakfast. Sit down, I'll fix your eggs," Julie said smiling at him.

Brett took the spatula from her hand and turned her toward the table. "You go sit, I'll finish this," he

ordered in mock sternness and swatted her gently to propel her on the way.

Mary arrived when they were finishing up their meal. Ever vigilant, she noticed some subtle difference between them. She smiled to herself; they would make a great couple. It would be good for Brett to have someone, and as far as she could tell Julie would give him a good run for his money.

"You look good this morning, Julie," Mary said and put her hand on Julie's head, feeling for fever.

"I feel great this morning! I think I'm all well now. I can be up and around," Julie stated firmly, smiling at both Brett and Mary.

Brett frowned and replied by pulling her chair out from the table. "You may feel that way, but until Doc Adams clears you, you'll do what he said, and now that means going back to bed."

Mary laughed at the frown on Julie's face. "Doc should be here in a few hours and then we'll see what he has to say."

Mary was chuckling as Brett led Julie from the room.

"Really Brett, I feel fine. I don't want to go back to bed," Julie said as Brett ushered her to the bed.

"Until Doc sees you, this is what you're going to do. Now be a good girl. I'll be home early today and may have some news from Abner," Brett told her and tucked the covers around her. Before he straightened up, he kissed her gently on the lips. "Be good."

Phil and George had been demanding to talk to their lawyer ever since they'd arrived at the jail the night before. All their demands had only been met with the same phrase.

"When the sheriff gets here, he'll take care of it."

Neither one slept well and eyed their breakfast of grits and eggs suspiciously. Phil sneered and asked the officer, "What is this, pig slop? You expect us to eat this?"

"Suit yourself. Eat it or not, lunch is served at noon," he replied with a shrug of the shoulders and slammed the cell door shut again for emphasis.

When Brett walked into the station he could hear George calling, demanding loudly again for his lawyer. Brett shook his head and shut his office door. His first call was to the state informing them of the two prisoners and the charges. They assured him they'd pick them up that afternoon.

When Tom came in, Brett called him into his office. "Ready to have some fun with our 'guests'?" he asked him.

"Sure thing, I'll have them taken to the interrogation room," Tom said and left.

Brett poured himself another cup of coffee and met Tom. When they entered the room, Phil stood up and shouted at Brett, "I'll have your badge for this, you stupid hick. You have no idea how much trouble you're in."

"Sit down. You've wanted to call your attorney, go ahead. Then we'll have a little chat until the state guys come for you," Brett replied, pushing a phone toward them.

Julie wasn't happy being put to bed like a child. She was still bristling when Mary came in with her meds and some tea.

"Would you like a book to read? Brett has quite a library to choose from." Mary asked, knowing she was about ready to jump out of her skin.

"Maybe, I'll just get up and go look at them," Julie said, hopping out of bed before Mary could say a word.

"You'd better be back here in bed when Doc arrives, Missy, or you'll feel the full wrath of his scolding. He doesn't like his orders ignored," Mary called after her.

Julie yelled back over her shoulder as she descended the stairs, "Couldn't be any worse than Brett's hand."

Mary wasn't quite sure she'd heard her right, but if she had, there was definitely something developing between the two. She knew Brett was a no nonsense type of guy and wouldn't hesitate to turn his lady over his knee if she did something foolish.

Julie had in fact just made it back to bed when she heard Doc's voice talking to Mary. She said a silent prayer that he would allow her to finally be up the rest of the day.

"How's my patient this morning?" Doc's deep booming voice asked as he walked through the door.

"I'm all better," Julie answered.

"Let's just check you out to be sure." He got his stethoscope out.

Several minutes later, he smiled. "You are indeed a lot better; the congestion's almost gone and so's the fever. You can be up and about in moderation, but you're to rest several times a day. No excess exercise, hear?" he said with a stern look on his face. "I doubt Brett wants you out of the house at any rate, but you can take that up with him. I'll let him know, and unless you start feeling worse, I'd say in two weeks you can resume normal activities. You call me if you feel worse."

Julie was ecstatic hearing the news. "Oh I'm going to take a shower and get dressed. Then I'm going to be downstairs aaalll day," she cheerfully told Mary, bounding out of bed like a school girl.

Mary laughed and left her in peace to get dressed. She'd have to check with Brett and see if he still wanted her to come every day or not. Julie shouldn't be left alone for safety's sake, but maybe he wanted to put a deputy with her.

Brett and Tom were thoroughly enjoying the discomfort that Phil and George were feeling at the news the state was taking them into custody. They'd left them alone in the room to make their call but were observing them and listening in from the room next door.

"I can't believe this hick town. You've got to get us out of here, and fast. You know who, isn't going to be pleased. We're very close to accomplishing what he set us out to do. These yahoos are just mucking things up. I'd say that sheriff knows something, if he weren't just too backwoods and stupid," Phil told the man on the other end of the line.

Tom chuckled and remarked to Brett, "Wonder what bright boy would think if he knew we graduated from William and Mary with a degree in criminal justice?"

"They probably don't know what that is," Brett said chuckling. "I think it's time we just let them stew for a bit. I expect their attorney will be calling me momentarily. I think we need to be 'unavailable'."

Brett grabbed his jacket and called to the desk sergeant, "See that our guests are returned to their cell. We'll be back shortly."

Phil and George were fuming when they were shown back to their cells without talking to the sheriff. Their attorney had told them not to say anything, but they were hoping they could get a feel for how serious the sheriff was on the charges. Neither one wanted to risk getting sent back to prison, let alone face the consequences from their employer for getting caught.

Abner was in meetings again with the group assigned to what was now officially the '*Gilbert*' case.

"Okay, we've had 24 hours to think about our plans - any further suggestions?" Abner looked at the group around the table.

"I've seen pictures of Julie Gilbert that've appeared in the paper, and her official photo. There's a woman agent in the narcotics division that resembles her a lot. I was thinking if we dress her in black with black veils and take her into the funeral home before the public is allowed, but have a photographer there to snap the picture, and leak that Julie is being spirited in and out, that might serve to put them off the trail," one of the young agents stated.

"You young people have good careers ahead of you," Abner told him. "That's a great idea. It needs a bit of work, though. Perhaps plant the leak ahead of time, get a few people expecting it. I'm sure word would get to Parson and whoever else is looking for her."

One of the senior agents had been quiet, but spoke up, "I know just the reporter to leak it to. I think he has ties to Parson's staff and to the oil group as well. I'll get on it."

They talked more and decided that since the viewing was to start on Sunday morning, for close friends, they would plan on 'Julie' appearing on Saturday afternoon. They would then spirit her back to a remote hotel in Virginia, and set up guards. She'd be registered as J. G. Smith. It would be interesting to see how long before someone tried to get to her. Of course she wouldn't be there any longer. As soon as they got back to the hotel she'd be out of costume and leave as herself for the drive back to D.C.

"Let's get busy. We have to arrange for the helicopter and transport of Powell," Abner told the crew, starting to dismiss them.

"Before we leave, I've been thinking," the young agent who'd thought of the Powell plot spoke up.

Abner sat back down and waited for him to speak.

"A helicopter leaving from anywhere and landing in or near Clifton Forge might bring a lot of unwanted notice to that area. Since we have him leaving in disguise with a woman, why not just continue to drive there. Perhaps stop in one of the safe houses overnight and continue on the next day."

"That's good, but how are we to get him back here in time for services on Tuesday?" Abner asked.

"It would have to be a short visit, but he could drive to a regional airport and get a regular flight back to D.C. They could drive back to the funeral home and we'd do the swap there again," the agent said.

"Okay, that's doable. Get the arrangements made pronto," Abner told them. "I want the details firmed up by 1:00 p.m. today so I can let Powell and Rowan know.

Chapter Six

George Parson was yelling into the phone, "What do you mean no one can find her? You have to! Every minute she's alive is a threat to all we've planned."

"You're the one who created this mess, and I suggest you start laying low and acting like a bereaved fiancé and not an angry man. Do *not* contact me again, I'll let you know when it's safe," Mohammed Amman replied, and hung up in disgust.

George was sitting at his desk fuming when his assistant came in grinning from ear to ear. "Guess what I just learned from Hennessey at the Post?"

"Spill it, don't just stand there grinning like an idiot," George barked at him.

"He has it on good authority that Julie Gilbert is being smuggled into a private showing Saturday afternoon for her father. I don't know who she contacted, but it apparently isn't Powell, he's been cleared, and seems to know nothing. She must've contacted someone else, not sure who," he reported, still grinning.

George sneered, a cruel smile forming across his face. "Contact the guys. Have someone follow her back to where she's staying, then let the idiots that were supposed to find her know. I'll conveniently be tied up with a perfect alibi. God, I want her out of my life!" he exclaimed.

Frank Powell listened carefully as Abner explained what was going to happen on Sunday.

"I know this is only going to be a short visit, but we haven't any other choice. We need you back here Tuesday morning for the service. It would just be too suspicious if you weren't here, and I don't think your double can pull off talking to the President and other dignitaries who will be here."

"I understand, but I'll cut it as close as I can. I think Julie needs a lot of encouragement right now. I intend to try and get back there or at least stay in touch daily," Frank informed him.

"That's fine. We should have things set up for a press conference by next weekend. It's imperative they don't find her before then. I'll call Rowan and let him know the plans, and you can expect a call from him this evening," Abner told him, hung up, and dialed Brett.

"I'm sorry, Sheriff Rowan is out at the moment, can I have him call you?" the receptionist asked.

"This is an official FBI matter and I need to speak to him immediately, please radio him and I'll hold," Abner ordered.

Tom answered the radio and handed it to Brett. It was unusual for them to page Brett personally, so he answered, wondering what was happening, "Rowan here."

"Sheriff, I have someone on the phone who says he's from the FBI and needs to talk to you right away. Do you want me to patch it through?"

"No, I know who it is, I'll call him right back," Brett replied.

He turned to Tom. "That's Abner, I need to call him right away."

"Ok, I'll just stop at the Real Estate office and visit Betsy while you talk. Let me know when you're finished.

"Hi Abner, what's up?" Brett asked.

"We've got things in motion for this weekend. It should work like a charm," Abner said and launched into his explanation.

"I think you need to know about the guests I have in the jail," Brett relayed, and told him about the break-in and arrest of George Denato and Phil Amici, who were looking for Julie.

Abner was quiet for a second, then asked, "Do you think they have any suspicions at all? No one's seen her, right?"

"Just Doc Adams and Mary, the nurse, but they won't tell a soul. Denato and Amici are really suspicious that the car was here, and that's why they broke into the garage, but other than that, no. State should have them shortly, so they'll be out of the area," Brett reported.

"Good, remind Julie, that it's more important than ever that she lay low and isn't seen. They'll really be on the alert now."

Abner hung up and Brett motioned to Tom.

"Time for us to get back to the station and see what our 'guests' have to say, if anything," Brett told him.

"A certain Thomas Raines has been frantically trying to reach you. He's furious that you aren't available to discuss his clients," the desk sergeant told him when he came into the station.

"I figured someone would be trying to reach me. In due time I'll call him, but for now I'd like to speak to the two men. If he calls again, tell him I'm not back," Brett told him and he and Tom went to the interrogation room to await Phil and George.

"Afternoon, gentlemen, I trust you enjoyed your lunch?" Brett asked them when they were seated.

"Did you speak to our attorney yet?" demanded Phil.

"Well no, as a matter of fact, I had other business to attend to. I'll get to him soon. I'm sure he'll want to talk to the state guys more than me," Brett told him, exaggerating a drawl.

"Care to tell me boys, why you were breaking into Carl's place? I saw it this morning and you sure did a number on it," Brett asked them.

"We aren't saying anything," said Phil, cutting George off before he could speak. Then turned back to Brett asking him, "Surely you aren't going to press charges for a bit of harmless fun?"

"Me? Oh, I don't think it's a matter of pressing charges. You were caught with guns in the process of robbing the place. Had some of his property on you - that's a felony, boys, and the state will take care of the charges. I'm just here to make sure you get there. Well, they should be here most anytime, so I'll let you rest before your little trip." Brett stood up and he and Tom left, chuckling as soon as the door was closed.

"Guess I'd better see what Mr. Raines wants, as if I didn't know," Brett told Tom as he entered his office.

Brett was connected through to Raines immediately. The secretary couldn't transfer him fast enough.

"Sheriff Rowan, I find this totally unethical that you have arrested my clients and refuse to talk to me until hours later. I need to know the details of their arrest and the amount of bail," Raines demanded.

"We-elll," drawled Brett, "I'd like to help you with that, but see, the state boys are on their way. They'll be doing the arraigning and bail and stuff, so it seems you'll have to talk to them. I can tell you we caught them with guns in the middle of a

robbery last night. Had some of the property still on them."

He could hear Raines say something about stupid backwoods cops as he slammed the phone down.

Julie was extremely happy as she showered and changed into clean slacks and a sweater. Mary had gathered up her other clothes and night clothes and was laundering them.

Julie explored the rest of the house that she hadn't ever really seen and spent some time reading and watching TV. At lunchtime she peppered Mary with questions regarding the town.

"How long have you lived here?" she asked her.

"I was born here. My husband was from here and we just naturally settled down here. He was a fireman and I worked for Doc Adams' father for years and for him too. I quit periodically to raise my kids, but they're all grown and scattered to all parts of the country now," Mary told her.

"What happened to your husband?" Julie was curious. It seemed to her men wound up leaving the women eventually.

"We were married for 35 years and he was killed in a bad fire. I just never remarried. Was busy with my job and never felt the desire to. I guess maybe another good man just never came along."

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't pry, but it seems everyone knows so much about me, and I don't know anything about anyone else," Julie mumbled.

"Oh sweetie, that's perfectly fine. What else can I tell you? I know everyone in town," Mary asked, glad for an opportunity to gossip a bit.

Julie perked up and, eyes twinkling, asked her, "Tell me about Brett. He mentioned losing a woman he loved, what happened, who was she?"

"That was very sad. Brett was born here, too, but his father was involved with the FBI and they moved to the D.C. area when he was about ten. His parents moved back here when his dad retired, but he was in college at William and Mary so wasn't back here for a while. When he did come back he met Shelly Baker. I think it was instant love. He got a job in the sheriff's department and married her. They were married for about five years when she was in a terrible traffic accident and was killed. It really devastated him. It was said that they'd had an argument. He'd told her not to go wherever she was headed and she did anyway," Mary paused, "He has kept pretty much to himself since then," she finished.

Julie had tears in her eyes when Mary finished. "That's so sad. He's such a good man, I can't believe some woman hasn't gotten him."

"Oh, plenty have tried, he just never has shown any interest," Mary replied, then added, "Until now."

Julie looked at her and blushed, but said nothing.

Mary chatted for a bit longer about the town and other people in it, then looked at her watch. "Oh heavens, I have things to do, and you should be resting."

"I'll go nap on the couch. I'm not going back to bed until tonight. I've had enough of that bed to last me a lifetime," Julie told her.

An hour later, Mary checked on her and she was curled up in a ball on the couch sound asleep, a book dangling from her fingers. Carefully, she took the book, set it on the table and covered her with an afghan.

Mary held her finger to her lips, shushing Brett when he came stomping in the back door. "Julie's asleep on the couch," she whispered. "She's been on a high all day since Doc told her she could be up. I think she finally crashed, but she's really been good today; much livelier and happier than I've ever seen her."

"Good, I'm glad she's resting though, I don't want her having a relapse."

"Do you want me to come back on Monday, since Doc has said she can be up and around?" Mary asked him.

"I'd appreciate it if you would. I don't want her alone; if she is, I'm afraid she might try going out and that wouldn't be good at all," Brett replied.

"No problem, I'll be here Monday morning then," Mary told him, then got her coat and purse and left.

Brett went into the living room to check on Julie and saw her starting to toss a bit. Before he could get to her she was crying and mumbling, "No ...stop... don't hit me anymore."

Her fist was in her mouth and tears streamed down her face.

"Julie, wake up, hon, you're dreaming again," Brett rubbed her back.

She opened her eyes, but was still crying. Brett picked her up and sat in the rocker with her on his lap, rocking and soothing her.

"I don't want to sleep anymore," Julie said with a catch in her voice. "I just have horrid dreams and get so scared."

"Hopefully, you won't have them much longer. Abner is working on getting you out of this."

Julie sniffed and lay back against Brett's chest. It seemed that was the only place she felt safe anymore.

Brett rocked and held her for a few more minutes then set her back on the couch.

"I'm going to grab a shower and change. If the phone rings, don't answer it, let the machine catch it."

"Okay," Julie said but really didn't understand why.

He had been gone about fifteen minutes when the phone did ring. Julie had her hand on it ready to pick it up, when his hand covered hers and he answered it.

"Hi Brett, the state boys just left with our guests, who weren't at all happy. They were protesting loudly about rights being violated and entrapment," Tom said, laughing.

"Good, let the state have them. I'm just glad they're out of our hair. See you Monday," Brett told him, hung up, and then turned to Julie.

He said nothing, but took her arm, turned her around, and swatted her hard about ten times. When he was finished he scolded her, "I told you not to answer the phone for your own safety. I want you to obey me when I tell you something."

Julie sniffed and looked up at him. "I'm sorry... I didn't think."

"You have to start thinking... and thinking clearly. As long as no one knows you're here, you're safe. Others could easily follow those two men, who were here. I don't know what they'll tell whomever they report to. Do you understand now?" Brett asked.

"Yes, but I still think it would be best if I left," Julie muttered under her breath.

Brett felt his teeth clench when he heard what Julie muttered. He didn't say a word but took her arm and pulled her over to a kitchen chair. Before she realized what was happening, she was over his knee with her jeans and panties at her knees.

"I don't want to hear another word about you leaving, young lady," he scolded as he spanked her bare bottom. "If I even think you're thinking it, you'll find yourself right back here." He spanked her for a minute longer, then stood her up, pulled up her clothes, and hugged her.

Julie sniffled, but hugged him back tightly.

Brett sighed and rubbed her back. "Julie, I really don't want to keep spanking you, but you have to learn to trust me. I won't let anything happen to you, I promise," he told her softly.

"I'm trying to, it's just really hard right now."

"I know that, but please promise me. I won't let you down, and you know that Frank won't, either," Brett told her and set her on her feet. "Time to think about dinner."

Abner read the last of the reports from his team; everything was set for Sunday. Satisfied, he picked up the phone and dialed Brett's house.

"Hi Brett, Abner. Everything's set for Sunday. Powell will arrive Monday morning. No helicopters - we don't want to arouse any attention. He'll have to leave early Tuesday morning to catch a shuttle back to Washington for the service," he reported.

"Good, I'll change my plans and be here then. I don't want to miss meeting him, and I want to be with Julie when she does. It may take both of us to convince her to do what she has to," Brett replied and frowned. Julie had walked into the room as he said her name.

"Oh, and we are having 'Julie' appear at the funeral home on Saturday morning. Should throw a real monkey wrench in any plans they may have at this time. I'll talk to you later." Abner hung up.

"Who was that and what do you have to convince me to do?" Julie asked, a look of doubt on her face.

"It was Abner. Frank's coming to see you on Monday. I'll explain it all to you after dinner. Sit down and let's eat now," Brett said.

"I want to know now," Julie told him with her arms crossed.

"Julie, I said after dinner, and after dinner it is. I suggest you sit." Brett glared right back at her.

Even though she didn't want to, Julie sat down, but wouldn't talk to Brett at all. She sat there pouting with her arms crossed, refusing to eat.

"You are really behaving like a spoiled brat. In this house brats get sent to their rooms to get their hairbrush, are spanked and sent to bed. Do you want that?" Brett asked her ominously.

"I just want to know what you're planning about me. I have the right to know, Brett, my life is the one at stake."

"It's long and complicated, and I want you to eat first. I'll tell you about it after, okay?" he told her again.

Sighing, Julie picked up her fork and started eating. The conversation was strained and Brett finally gave up trying to talk to her.

The minute the kitchen was cleaned up Julie once again demanded, "What's going on and who were you talking to about me?"

"Let's go sit in the living room," replied Brett.

Julie was fuming and marched in stony silence into the living room, plunking herself down on the couch.

"Ok, Master, I'm here, now what's going on?" she demanded.

"Julie, I suggest you lose the attitude right now. I'm not going to put up with it," Brett said and sat next to her. "Abner's arranged for Frank to visit here on Monday. He'll be arriving sometime in the morning and will unfortunately have to return early Tuesday morning to Washington for the memorial service," Brett explained.

"Why was that so important that it had to wait until after dinner?"

"I'm not finished explaining, Julie."

Julie was beginning to feel uncomfortable under the glare from Brett's angry eyes.

"I'm sorry, go ahead," Julie said in a much softer voice.

"Good. He's being watched and his phones have been tapped. They're going to pick him up in a special limousine, supposedly sent from the President, for the private viewing on Sunday afternoon. Once he's been seen at the funeral home, he'll excuse himself and go to a back room. There he'll be disguised so he'll no longer look anything like himself. They have a double of him in place that will be seen getting into the limo and returning home. The real Frank will leave with a woman agent posing as his wife, get into a car and drive off. They'll come most of the way here and stop at a safe house for the night. They'll make sure they aren't followed and will arrive here the next day," Brett told her.

Julie paled and said nothing. Brett pulled her onto his lap and continued.

"They're also going to have someone posing as you go to a private showing on Saturday morning. That information's been leaked and afterward she'll go back to a hotel where she's registered as J.G.

Smith. They're positive she'll be tailed. As soon as she gets there, she'll resume her identity and leave. But if someone tries to get into her room, they'll be tailed to find out who they're working for, or arrested if they commit a crime," Brett finished.

"Brett, it isn't safe for him to do this. Someone innocent's going to get killed and it'll be all my fault. I can't risk that," Julie said, tears rolling down her cheeks.

"Julie, it *is* safe. Frank Powell wants to see you and talk to you. He'll be here Monday and explain it to you. I'll be here with you. I want you to listen to what he says and be brave, okay?" Brett held her tightly against him.

Julie was quiet the rest of the evening, her thoughts a jumble. When it was bedtime, she went upstairs but didn't really want to sleep. Brett made sure she took her medicine, then hugged her.

"It'll be all right, Julie, everything will turn out fine. Abner's a genius, and all of the FBI is behind this. Get some sleep and maybe if you're still feeling good in the morning, I'll see if we can go for a short ride." Brett kissed her on the forehead and left, closing the door behind him.

Julie climbed in bed and was surprised that she fell asleep. The sound of someone screaming woke her up. She opened her eyes and found Brett holding her.

"What happened?" she asked him sleepily, the sense of terror she felt slowly ebbing.

"You had a nightmare again. You were screaming," he said soothingly.

"That was me? I thought I heard someone else screaming," Julie said, and started shaking.

"Please stay with me, Brett, I don't want to be alone," she pleaded, her gray eyes reflecting her fear.

Brett knew he couldn't leave her alone, and just prayed that he'd be strong enough to resist her. He lay down next to her and pulled her into his arms.

Phil and George were in separate interrogation rooms at the State Police headquarters. They knew from experience that they had to keep their stories straight. One slip up and they'd be in more trouble than the charges against them right now.

A beefy lieutenant was sitting across from George and another detective was lounging against the wall.

"Well Mr. Denato, seems you want to rejoin our fine facilities at Wallens Ridge. Surely you must have heard of that place?" he taunted him.

George sat impassively saying nothing, but fuming on the inside.

"Oh maybe not, it might be new since your last stay with us. It's quite a nice place way down there in the southwest corner of the state at Big Stone Gap. Impressive place...no escapes there," he explained and then slammed his huge hairy hand on the table.

George just looked at him and smiled, before commenting dryly, "We'll see."

"Care to tell us what you were after in that repair shop?" the other detective asked.

George was silent.

"Who're you working for George, and why were you looking for the Gilbert woman. Senator Parson, by the way, denies knowing you," he told him.

"I've told you. We were looking for a receipt we dropped there in the afternoon."

"That doesn't work, George, you wouldn't need masks and guns for that, now would you? Wouldn't need all that cash in your pockets and those tools either. If you cooperate with us, we can get you a lighter sentence."

"Quit playing games with him," the beefy lieutenant told the other one. He turned back to George, demanding, "Who are you taking orders from, Georgie? We'll find out and you're going to be gone for a very long time if you don't start helping us here."

"I'm not saying anything until my lawyer gets here," George replied.

The two left the room and told an officer to return him to his cell.

Much the same scenario played out for Phil. He too refused to cooperate and was locked up in a separate cell from George. There was no way they were going to allow them to talk to each other.

Thomas Raines was speaking to Amman on his way to the jail to see about getting George and Phil out on bail. He could speak clearly as his driver was unable to hear with the privacy panel closed.

"I understand fully, Sir, I'll get as much information as I can from them," Raines said into the phone.

He listened for a moment then blanched. "Yes sir, I'll call the number immediately once I know when they'll be released. Of course, I'll tell them you arranged a rental car for them," he said and disconnected the line. He wasn't pleased with this turn of events, but he'd been in Amman's employ for too long now and resigning wasn't an option.

Julie crept quietly out of bed the next morning so she wouldn't wake up Brett, who was still

sleeping. She'd finished her shower and was drying off when it suddenly hit her. She hadn't felt this happy in a long time. Even with all the problems looming over her, just lying in Brett's arms made her happy. This was not a good thing. There was no way she could trust herself to fall in love again, it always ended with her heartbroken. In a week or so, she'd be free to go on, and he'd want her out of his house. That thought alone had tears rolling down her cheeks. She put her robe on and sat down on the toilet, trying to stifle her sobs into the towel.

Brett woke to the sound of muffled sobs and tears. Julie wasn't in bed. He got up and followed the sounds to the bathroom door.

He knocked and the sounds seemed to grow quieter. "Julie, are you okay?" he asked through the door.

When he didn't get an answer he opened the door and his heart melted at the sight of her sitting there crying.

He picked her up and carried her back to the bed. Holding her, he rocked and soothed her; it was becoming a habit. "What's wrong? Did you have another dream?"

Julie shook her head; there was no way she could tell him.

"There's a reason you're crying Julie, and I want to know what it is. Don't make me spank it out of you," he told her softly.

Chapter Seven

Julie looked up at Brett and started crying harder at the look in his eyes. Finally, she stopped and drew a deep breath. "I'm afraid. I felt so happy when I woke up, but I know that soon it'll be all bad again. It made me sad," she explained.

"Julie, it doesn't have to be bad. I told you how I feel. I don't want you to feel bad; I want you to be happy. Whatever I need to do to make that happen, I will," Brett stopped short of telling her he loved her again.

Julie sighed and relaxed against him once more. For now she'd savor the time she could spend being held by him.

"Why don't you get dressed, then after breakfast we'll drive across to West Virginia where no one knows us and get you some boots and a decent jacket. Maybe have some lunch, then get you home to rest. Would you like that?" Brett asked her.

"Oh thank you! I'd love it."

Julie managed to shake off her sadness and as soon as breakfast was over she was bundled up in sweaters and her coat and in the car. Brett made sure he avoided the main roads through the area, where he was likely to be recognized. The town he was headed for was in West Virginia and he didn't know anyone there. His only concern was that

someone might recognize Julie. He'd have to make sure she didn't call attention to herself.

"Julie, it's going to be necessary for you to keep a low profile when we're there, even though it's a different town. It doesn't pay to call any attention to you," Brett told her.

"Okay, but I can't wait to buy some things. I haven't exercised my credit card in ages," Julie giggled.

"Oh, and that's another thing. You can't use it. I'll pay for the purchases. It's not safe to use the card."

Julie nodded but couldn't quite see his point. After all, they were in a different state. If they wanted to track her there, they'd be way off base. She'd just see about letting him pay.

It was a cute little town nestled against the mountain. Julie loved it and there were lots of shops. They parked the car and headed first to a shoe store. There was no chance to pay for anything there at all. Brett took charge the minute they entered the store.

"My wife needs some boots. Can we see some suitable for horseback riding and for snow?" Brett told the salesman.

It seemed like Julie had tried on a hundred pairs but finally selected two pairs. Brett quickly went to the front of the store to pay for them. Julie really didn't like it, but he wasn't giving her a chance to do anything about it.

The next store they went into was more diversified. Brett left Julie looking at coats and went to look at some things for himself.

"I'll be right over here, if you need anything just holler. Remember I'll pay for what you want, just bring it to me," Brett instructed as he left.

Julie found a warm coat and some slacks, a skirt, and sweaters. The store really had a nice selection. When she was finished she looked around and saw Brett way at the back of the store talking with a clerk. Smiling to herself, she took the clothes to the counter and set them down.

"How would you like to pay for these," the clerk inquired.

"With my credit card," Julie responded and reached in her purse for the card. Just as she was about to hand it to the girl, Brett's hand took it from her.

"No, don't use that one honey, I'll use this one," he said smiling but his eyes were glaring at her.

With purchases in hand, he steered her out of the store. When they were back at the car, he opened the door and put in the parcels and waited while she got in.

Without a word he pulled out and started down the street. When they pulled into a restaurant parking lot he turned to her.

"I told you not to use your credit card, Julie. That was a foolish thing to do, not to mention the fact that you deliberately disobeyed me. I'm sorry, but you're in for a serious spanking when I get you home. You *will* learn to listen to me. I don't give orders for fun. This was for your own protection. I'm not going to allow you to be harmed," he told her in a low stern voice.

"Brett, I'm sorry, but I don't like being a burden," Julie said, her voice just above a whisper.

Brett sighed, got out of the car and opened her door. When she stepped out he pulled her against him and kissed her. Julie was shocked for a second and then leaned into the kiss. He felt so good.

"You are *not* a burden Julie Gilbert, you know how I feel, but you *are* getting a spanking."

Julie mumbled under her breath, "But will you when this is solved?"

"Young lady, doubt is not becoming, don't up the ante on that spanking. I heard what you said. I know you don't trust me right now, but I'll be here for you always. Now let's get some lunch."

Holding hands, they walked into the diner and got a table in a far corner where there wouldn't be much traffic passing the table. Brett had Julie sit with her back to the restaurant and he sat on the opposite side so he could keep an eye on things.

Both ordered soup and sandwiches and Julie was surprised at how good it was. "This tastes just like it was made at home."

"Typical of small town places. I'm sure it was made right here in the kitchen. It *is* good," Brett remarked.

They were almost finished with lunch when Julie glanced at the TV on the wall and said, "Ut oh!"

Brett turned and looked at what she was watching. It was a news bulletin showing a woman leaving a limousine, heavily veiled. The announcer was saying... "We are here at the funeral home for Senator Gilbert's wake. His daughter, Julie, who was reported missing, has just arrived. Apparently she isn't missing."

"Julie, we need to leave. I want you to just get up and go to the car. I'll take care of the bill," Brett said quietly.

Julie nodded and started to rise, but the waitress appeared at their table.

"That is some mystery... if I were engaged to that darling Senator... I'd never leave him alone. What a hunk he is, I'd be there no matter what. Rich too...oh well, guess she has a ton and not worried. Wonder what happened?" she commented,

then scribbled a total on her bill and turned to leave.

"Wow, you know you really look like her," she said to Julie.

Julie didn't know how to respond to the waitress. She looked at Brett, confusion clearly visible in her eyes.

Brett smiled broadly at the waitress and said, "Yes, I guess she does. Makes me a lucky guy doesn't it? Too bad she doesn't have that woman's money."

"Yeah, too bad we all don't," she laughed and laid the check on the table.

"Okay Julie, go now, and I'll be right there," Brett said.

Julie sat in the car and thought for a moment about just starting it and driving off. This had to end. Before she could much more than think it, Brett returned and they were on the way home.

It was a quiet ride with Julie deep in thought.

"There was no harm done there, Julie," Brett finally said breaking the silence.

"I don't think I can take any more of this, Brett. It would..."

"If you want me to pull over and spank you right now, you can finish that thought. Otherwise I'd stop now," Brett informed her.

Julie glared at him but didn't say anything more. She turned away from him and looked out the window, ignoring him completely.

Brett glanced at her several times and smiled; she was the picture of a pouty little girl if he ever saw one. She'd have plenty to pout about as soon as they arrived home. The memory of her defying him with the credit card still filled him with thoughts of what could have happened.

All too soon to suit Julie, they arrived home. She was not happy about what Brett said when they walked in the door

"Go upstairs to your room, I'll be up in a few minutes. While you're there think about what you did and why you're about to be spanked."

Julie glared at Brett and snapped, "I hardly think that's necessary, Brett, I'm an adult not a five-year-old." Defiantly, Julie sat down and turned on the TV.

"You have a lot to learn, young lady," Brett said, pulling her off the couch, unsnapping her jeans and pulling them and her panties to her knees, before putting her over his knee. His hand smacked down hard on her bottom and sit spot, while he lectured.

"When I tell you to do something, you'd best do it. You earned a spanking and you know you did. This is not the main event either, this is for defiance," he scolded. Finally, when her bottom was bright pink and she was crying softly, he stood her up. "Now, go to your room."

Julie pulled up her pants and fled up the stairs. Brett sat there for a few minutes to calm down and then climbed the stairs after her.

When he entered her room, she was lying on the bed pouting. Brett ignored her, got her hairbrush from the bathroom and sat down on the bed next to her.

Without a word, he put her back over his knee and slid her jeans and panties down again. His hand proceeded to light a fire on her bottom and sit spot like she'd never felt before.

"Brett, stop, please...stop...I'm sorry...I'll obey you," she sobbed.

Brett stopped and rested his hand on her now hot bottom. "I know this is hard on you Julie, but I told you before, I can't let anything happen to you. I was going to use the hairbrush but I won't. But if

you ever put yourself in danger again, I will," he said and pulled her into his arms.

Julie nestled against his chest sobbing out her misery. "Julie, hush, I don't want to spank you, but you have to learn to listen to me. I only tell you to do things to protect you."

"I'm soooooorry," Julie sobbed into his shoulder.

"I know you are, and this will all be over soon, I promise," Brett said softly into her ear and kissed her forehead lightly.

When she'd quieted, Brett carried her into the bathroom. "Wash your face, then come down and we'll watch 'you' on the news."

Julie nodded and ran the cold water to splash on her face and eyes.

Abner and his crew sat in the office of the funeral home and watched the surveillance cameras. They'd seen the reporters and TV crews stationed outside the home and chuckled. This was working out perfectly.

"We know for sure we can count on our leaks to work for us," he commented to the rest of them.

The agent playing 'Julie' was perfect. If he hadn't known who it was, he'd have been fooled himself. Once she was inside they watched carefully to see if there were any people on the outside that didn't look like they belonged. At first they didn't see anything, but as 'Julie' left and got back into the limo, a car pulled away from the curb and followed them.

Abner picked up the phone and dialed the limo driver. "You've got a tail. Make sure he doesn't lose you, but don't let anyone near Beth. Give her a chance to get in and changed."

The next phone call alerted the agents at the hotel that they'd have company at some point.

Julie came downstairs after about five minutes. Brett had opened a bottle of wine and had two glasses ready. Julie suddenly felt very unsure about her feelings and sat down gingerly in the rocker by the fire.

It didn't take much for Brett to figure out how she felt. "Julie, come sit here with me, please," he asked.

When she hesitated, he smiled, got up, picked her up, and sat down with her in his lap, holding her against him and gently rocking her.

"What's the matter, sweetie?" he asked.

"I...I ...just felt shy," she told him, leaning back against him.

"I may spank you Julie, but when it's done, it's over and you're forgiven. There's no need to feel shy with me, now let's watch the news and have some wine and relax. It's been a busy day."

He carried her back to the couch and they snuggled together watching the news of the fake Julie arriving and leaving the funeral home.

"This is weird, she really does look like me."

"She does," Brett replied. "Leave it to Abner to be very thorough. I'm sure the cover up with Frank will be just as good. Now, it's time for you to rest. Want to go upstairs?"

"No, please I'm not sleepy, I just want to watch TV a bit longer." Julie said and yawned.

A few minutes later Brett could feel her slump against his shoulder. He pulled a cover over them and leaned back to rest himself.

Thomas Raines instructed his driver to drop him off at the front door and wait. After he identified himself and was searched, he was shown into a room where he could talk with his clients.

Moments later George and Phil were brought to him.

"Took you long enough to get here," Phil told him, rubbing his arms where the handcuffs had been.

"Yeah, I hope you're prepared to bail us out," George added, "We've got something to settle in Clifton Forge, and a job to finish."

Raines frowned at the two, they really were unpleasant jerks, but he was paid well to defend them, or in this case at least to get them out.

"I've talked to the State's Attorney and you're to appear in court in one hour. At that arraignment hearing the judge will set bail. Once that's done, I'll immediately pay it and you'll be released until trial," Raines informed them.

"Now I need to know what you were doing, what transpired, exactly," he said and waited for them to respond.

"You know what happened, we already told you," George replied.

"I know what you said you got arrested for. I need to know what it was that inspired you to enter that garage. What were you looking for?"

Phil motioned George to shut up and leaned across the table to Raines. "Look you know we were sent to find that Gilbert girl. I think she's there somewhere and those yahoo cops are covering her. I don't know why, but we intend to have a little private session with that sheriff and find out."

"Is that wise? You'll just be charged with further crimes," Raines responded.'

"Don't worry, he won't be around to let anyone know."

"I see. Well, I'll see you in court," he told them and left. This whole case was leaving a horrid taste in his mouth. He sincerely wished he'd never taken Amman on as a client.

Two hours later Phil and George were free.

"Okay, you said Amman arranged for a car for us, where is it?" Phil asked.

"It's in the parking lot, you can't miss it," Raines said pointing to a Jeep Cherokee sitting in the lot.

"Stay in touch," Raines told them, hurrying off to his car. He wanted to be out of there as fast as he could.

Beth, the agent who'd played 'Julie', laughed when the limo driver told her about the tail.

"We expected as much, but we'll have to hurry this up some," she said.

As soon as the limo stopped, a doorman opened the door and 'Julie' hurried into the hotel. Two agents were waiting for her and whisked her down a hall into a room. It wasn't the one rented to J.G. Smith but one they had ready for her to change in. Another agent had entered the elevator and pressed the floor for the phony room.

Quickly, she changed clothes and piled her hair up on her head. She grabbed her purse and keys and left the room, calling over her shoulder, "See you back at work."

When she entered the lobby, she immediately spotted the men who'd been tailing her. Without a glance from them, she left, got into her car and headed back to headquarters.

The two men were instantly under surveillance. They approached the desk and asked the clerk,

"Who was that young woman in black that just came in. I think we're supposed to meet her but I've forgotten her last name."

"Oh that would be Julie Smith; shall I ring her room for you?" he asked. The men looked at each other and agreed. They watched the number he dialed and feigned disappointment when he reported there was no answer. "Thank you, we'll wait a bit."

When the clerk was busy with someone else, they slipped into the elevator and pressed the floor. The clerk, another agent, watched them and smiled when he saw them enter the elevator. He called the room again. "They're on the way," he reported.

The two listened at the door for a minute and heard the sound of a shower running. Quickly they picked the lock, drawing gloves on as they entered the room. This would be a fast kill. One had a syringe filled with a heart-stopping drug. Julie was about to suffer a fatal heart attack.

They approached the bathroom quietly and as they opened the door were greeted with a gun pointed at them.

"I think you best drop that and raise your hands. You're under arrest," the agent announced.

As soon as the men were on their way to headquarters to be questioned, Abner received a phone call.

"Caught two of them in the room, with what appears to be a syringe with a drug. They're on their way to you and the syringe is on the way to the lab," the agent reported.

"Thanks, good work," Abner told him. He turned to the rest of the team in the room. "Well they fell for that one, hook, line and sinker. Got two in custody, breaking and entering and most likely

attempted murder. Keep them on ice as long as you can."

Robert Parson was pacing his office, wondering why it was taking so long to get a report on Julie. Finally in a fit of anger, he called his assistant.

"Where are they? Why haven't we heard anything?" he barked into the phone.

"I have no idea. I asked them to call me as soon as they were there. They said they were to call Amman, not me," he responded.

Angrily, Robert slammed the phone down and sat fuming for a few moments, then picked it up and called Amman.

"What's happening with Julie Gilbert? I saw her leave the funeral home three hours ago and I've not heard a report yet," he growled into the phone.

Amman answered him with a chill in his voice. "You will be notified when *I* feel you need to know."

Robert was left listening to a dial tone.

After dinner, Brett put in a movie and Julie curled up against him. He put his arm around her and held her tight. All too soon it was time for bed. He sent Julie upstairs and he locked up and set the alarms.

When he went to say goodnight, she looked at him with a question in her eyes. Brett sighed and pulled her into his arms and kissed her. She deepened the kiss and finally he pulled away.

"Julie, you aren't ready for this yet. I'm only human and can't resist forever. I'll sit with you until you fall asleep, but I want you to try and stay alone tonight, okay?"

"Okay, but what if I get that dream again?" she asked coyly.

"I'm going to give you a sedative and hope you won't," Brett said, pushing her toward the bed. He tucked her in and went and got the pill and water. He made sure she took it then sat on the bed and held her until she fell asleep. Satisfied that she really was asleep, he went to his own room and to bed.

He woke early the next morning and realized she'd slept without a nightmare. He got up and dressed and looked in on her. When he saw her, he immediately went in and gathered her in his arms. She was sitting up hugging her knees crying. It was obvious that she had been for some time.

"Julie, why didn't you call me?" he asked gently.

"Cause, I didn't want to bother you. You didn't want me to be a bother, and I am," she sobbed.

"You're itching to get spanked again, aren't you?" Brett said kissing her head gently.

"No, but I am a bother, you couldn't really care, and if you did, I wouldn't be a bother," she told him, trying to pull out of his arms.

"Julie Gilbert, I've told you I love you. I do. Now, I don't think you're ready for a physical relationship yet. You aren't sure of your feelings for me, and don't totally trust me. Until then, I'm not going to do anything that you might be sorry for later on. I'm not like the others," Brett said in a serious tone. "However, if I hear you say one more time that I don't care, or that you're a bother, you'll be right back over my knee, young lady. Is that clear?" he scolded.

Julie looked up at his face and saw the seriousness and concern etched there. "I'm sorry."

"I'm going to start breakfast and we can do anything you want the rest of the day. Come down once you're dressed."

Julie hummed happily as she dressed. Her feelings were really starting to jell. How it happened she didn't know either, but she was falling in love with him. "Oh heck, I already am," she whispered to the mirror.

Chapter Eight

"I thought you might enjoy a real southern country breakfast today," Brett told Julie when she came downstairs.

Julie could smell the biscuits baking and sighed at the sight of the sausage gravy. Scrambled eggs were already on the warmer on the table.

"Oh Brett, this is heavenly! Where did you learn to cook like this?" she asked.

"From my mother. She believed boys needed to learn how to take care of themselves," Brett laughed.

After breakfast they settled in the living room with the TV on and the newspaper spread over the couch. Brett was sipping his coffee when he heard the bulletin on TV.

"Police in Virginia are investigating a car explosion that happened at an Interstate 81 rest area late yesterday. A late model Jeep Cherokee exploded, killing the two male occupants who had just been released on bail. The occupants have been identified as George Denato and Phillip Amici. No other injuries were reported. There is no further information from the State Police. As information is made available we'll report it."

Julie didn't react to the bulletin and continued reading. Brett sat thinking for a few minutes, then got up.

"I have to make some calls," he told Julie.

As he started to leave the room, Julie asked him, "Are those men the ones you had here?"

"Yes, and I need to call Abner," he replied.

Abner picked up the phone on the first ring. "I was just going to call you," he told Brett. "I heard the news. Looks like our boys failed badly and someone wanted them shut up. I've called State and asked them to keep you out of this. If others know where they were arrested and what for, we'll have reporters and cameras all over town. That won't be good with Frank coming. They'll cooperate but we can't be sure there won't be leaks. It's more important than ever we keep Julie out of sight."

"I agree, I'll alert my office too, to tell them I'm on vacation and that's official business and they can't release any information should anyone ask. Thanks, Abner," Brett said and hung up.

He turned to get more coffee and saw Julie standing there, her face ashen. "I'm scared, Brett. They're coming for me, aren't they?"

Brett pulled her close and rubbed her back. "You're safe here Julie, I promise. No one's going to hurt you ever again. Unfortunately, we have to stay in today. Should the doorbell ring, I want you to get upstairs immediately and shut your door. I don't think it will; it's just a precaution though."

Julie was shaking so Brett grabbed the phone, took her back to the living room and cuddled her as he dialed Tom.

"Tom, have you heard the news?" Brett asked him immediately.

"Yes, just got a call from state, too. They said that the FBI has requested they issue no information on their arrest. Are you expecting trouble?" Tom inquired.

"Not really, but in case anyone asks, no one is to say anything. Tell them that's classified

information and they'll have to talk to me. I'm out of town, so they'll have to wait."

"Got it! I'll spread the word now." Tom hung up and called the sergeant to tell him the new orders.

After he hung up, Brett hugged Julie hard. "Sorry, we can't go out today, anything special you want to do here?" he asked her.

"No, guess I'll just read," she said with a sigh.

Brett laughed. "I know you're bored, but I have some games we can play. Up for some Monopoly?"

"Sure, bet you I win!" Julie told him, laughing.

Abner received a phone call as soon as the two men who'd been arrested in the hotel arrived. "Okay, put them in an interrogation room and I'll be down. Have someone watch them," he ordered. He turned to another of his team and said, "Let's go, this ought to be good."

Two very dispirited men were sitting handcuffed across the table when Abner walked in.

"Afternoon, gentlemen, got yourself in a bit of trouble didn't you?"

"We want our attorney," one said.

"Eventually we'll let you talk to one, but you see, we aren't in any hurry at all. We can keep you here for a while before we have to let you speak with him. Now care to identify whom you were working for?" asked Abner.

"I'm not answering any questions until my attorney's here."

"Fine, you'll just have a long silent stay with us then," Abner responded. "Did you get their prints?" he asked one of the arresting agents.

"Yes, running them now."

Abner left the room and went to a desk to await the prints. Five minutes later, he had the reports in

his hand and smiled. The perps were Ricky "Razor" Moran and Jimbo Morelli. Like Amici and Denato, they had records a mile long. Abner ran their names through the computer and came up with the fact that they also were in the employ of Mohammed Amman. Seemed to be quite a trail back to him. His case was building nicely. He rose and went back to the interrogation room.

"Well, well, boys... seems you have quite a little history here. I guess you'll be joining one of our federal prisons this time. Have anything interesting you'd like to share? The more cooperative you are, the better off you'll be. We should have the lab report soon on what was in the syringe you had," Abner told them.

Ricky and Jimbo exchanged a glance but said nothing.

"Okay boys, I have things to do... see you later," Abner said and left. "Keep an eye on them and listen in. Even if we can't use it, I'd like to know what they're saying."

Once back in his office, Abner ran a few more inquiries on the computer before he received the lab report. Several hours later, his assistant came in with the report. Abner scanned it, whistled, and then picked up the phone to summon the "Gilbert" team.

"Check out this lab report. Those boys weren't fooling around. Anyone injected with that would be dead almost instantly and it would appear as a heart attack. Amman really doesn't want Julie to talk," Abner stated.

"You know, I wonder if Victor Gilbert's death was natural? Could the death have been a lure to get her to reveal herself?" the agent who came up with the double plan asked.

Abner and the others were quiet, then Abner picked up a phone and issued an order, "Call the coroner and see if they can do a tissue sample on Victor Gilbert for a toxic substance. It's urgent!"

Knowing it would be at least tomorrow before they had any results, Abner dismissed his team and decided to call it a day. Ricky and Jimbo could just rest their laurels in cells overnight.

Even though it was Sunday, Abner was in the office. He had a few hours to put in before he'd leave for the funeral home to meet Frank Powell. His phone rang the second he sat down.

"Abner, I'm glad I caught you," his assistant stated. "I got the report on Victor Gilbert. He was murdered. It was the same drug that was meant to be used on Julie."

"That sure changes the situation with our two boys. It also proves how powerful the information Julie has, is. Let's keep this under our hats for now. See if you can get a line on where Amici and Denato are," Abner said and hung up.

Ten minutes later his assistant came to his office with a news bulletin print out. "I guess Amman wasn't sure he could trust those two," he said.

After reading the bulletin Abner shook his head and commented, "This isn't good. I think we need to hold that news conference faster than planned."

Julie and Brett played games most of the afternoon, then halted to start dinner and listen to the news.

"Let me cook, Brett, you've done almost all of it the last two weeks," Julie said.

"What do you want to make? I'm not sure what I have in the freezer."

"Pour some wine and go sit and turn on the news, I'll figure it out," Julie told him, shooing him out of the kitchen.

Once he was gone, she rummaged through the freezer and found some beef tenderloin bits. It would be perfect for a nice beef burgundy. She remembered seeing some mushrooms in the refrigerator and onions in the pantry so they were all set. Brett had the TV on and had dozed off a bit, but woke to a wonderful aroma coming from the kitchen. Stretching, he got up to see what she was doing.

"That smells wonderful," he declared when he walked in.

"Thank you, I do like to cook," Julie told him smiling. "Now you can pour me some wine and as soon as this dough is ready to rest, I'll be out. I thought we might enjoy some homemade rolls."

Brett poured her wine, and watched her until she covered the dough.

Julie snuggled into Brett on the couch and he put his arm around her, pulling her close. This was getting to be a normal pattern, and he loved it.

After a minute they heard the announcer say that the next story would take them to Victor Gilbert's wake. They watched as Frank pulled up and entered the home. The reporters talked about the different people arriving and then a bit later announced that Frank Powell had been called away. They saw him leave and get back in the limo.

"You know, if I didn't know that wasn't Frank, I'd never believe anyone who said it wasn't," Julie declared.

"Abner's the best," Brett replied. "Let's just hope the rest goes without a hitch."

There was nothing more about it on the news and Julie left to do her rolls. Brett continued watching the news until the phone rang.

"Brett, this is Abner. I have some rather disturbing news for you. I've shared it with Frank, but you need to know." He proceeded to tell him about the revelation that Victor Gilbert was indeed murdered.

"Frank wants to tell Julie himself tomorrow, but I insisted you know ahead of time. We're taking double precautions to make sure he isn't followed. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Brett felt his heart skip a beat at the news. As soon as he hung up he went to the kitchen to see Julie. He wanted to make sure she hadn't overheard.

"Who was that?" Julie asked, smiling.

"Abner, giving me the thumbs up on the switch. Want some help?" Brett asked, hugging Julie tight against him.

Frank Powell was extremely upset when Abner told him the news about Victor. There was no point in killing him, unless Abner was correct and they were trying to make Julie reveal herself. He vowed that he would do all in his power to make sure that she was safe. Senator Parson had taken on a formidable enemy.

The switch at the funeral home went smoothly and they weren't followed at all. He was exhausted when he reached the safe house though, and as soon as they'd eaten he said goodnight and retired.

"Julie, this dinner is delicious. Maybe I should turn over the kitchen to you," Brett said, savoring a mouthful of Beef Burgundy.

"Thanks, I do like to cook. It was fortunate that the cooks we had at home loved to teach me. I learned from some of the best," Julie told him.

After dinner they fell into their routine of putting on a movie and watching until bedtime. When it was over, Julie was half dozing on Brett's shoulder.

"Time for bed, you have a big day tomorrow," Brett whispered to her gently, waking her up.

Julie bit her lip and looked at him. "I understand what you said last night Brett, but please stay with me. I won't tempt you," Julie pleaded with him.

"I will, but you have to know... just being with you is a temptation," Brett told her.

Brett waited until Julie was ready for bed then laid down next to her. He hugged and kissed her goodnight and prayed that soon he could do far more than that.

Julie cuddled against him, secure with his arms around her and slept soundly all night.

Abner had debated all Sunday what steps to take next in the investigation. Early Monday morning, he summoned the team and told them, "I'm going to try and scare Moran and Morelli into cooperating with us. Get me some copies of the news reports on Amici and Denato. I have a feeling they probably knew each other. Then, when confronted with the news that we know Victor Gilbert was murdered with the same drug they were carrying, we might get somewhere."

Ricky and Jimbo were getting tired of the run around they were receiving every time they

requested their attorney. Finally, they were once again being taken to the interrogation room. This time they'd insist they be allowed to call him.

"Morning, gentlemen, hope you're finding the accommodations pleasing," Abner told them, sitting down opposite.

"Quit playing games, Jones, we want our attorney. You can't keep denying us," Moran told him.

"Well, actually I can for a bit. But, I'll let you call him... arrange for bail if he can, but before I do, I thought maybe you'd like to see some recent news. Might prove interesting to you," Abner told them handing each one the news story.

Abner watched them as they read and could see a twitch in Moran's eye and a bit of paling on Morelli's part.

"I guess bail doesn't always work for everyone, does it?" Abner said. "Oh ,another bit of news for you. We've found that Victor Gilbert was murdered. He was injected with the same drug you were carrying to use on Julie Gilbert. That sort of ups the charges potential here. Well, if you're ready, I'll leave and you can call your attorney," Abner told them, standing up and heading for the door.

When he had his hand on the door, he turned back. "Unless you'd rather cooperate and get some protection. I hear they do a wonderful job in the witness protection program. Of course, you'd have to serve some time first, but I'm sure we could work something out."

Abner left and let them sit for fifteen minutes before returning with a phone. "Here it is," he told them, turning to leave again.

"Wait a minute, we'd like to talk to you about this protection stuff," said Morelli.

Abner motioned the stenographer and video man in. "Mind if we record this?" asked Abner. Both men agreed.

"Okay, what do you want to talk about?"

"How protected would we be? What would we have to tell you?" asked Moran.

"You'd have to tell me everything. Who killed Victor Gilbert, who you're working for, why they want Julie Gilbert dead. In other words, bare your souls, boys, or no deal."

They were silent for a minute then both agreed. "Okay, we'll talk. But this protection better be good, because the guys out there are well trained."

"That may be, but we've caught four of you, now, haven't we?"

Two hours later, Abner had all the information he could ask for. He and his team retired back to his office to discuss it and called in the U.S. Attorney's office to handle Moran and Morelli.

"How fast can we get a press conference set up?" asked Abner.

"We can do it Wednesday if you want. I just need some time to let the news media know and schedule it. Let them decide if they want to carry it or not," his assistant replied.

"Get on it now. Tell them we want to have a conference to reveal some information we've learned relating to Victor Gilbert's death. Make no reference to Julie."

"I think the rest of you know what you need to do. Keep Parson under surveillance. I'll call a team out to watch Amman. Also, the President needs to be informed, since this involves members of Congress. Let's get on it," Abner said, dismissing them.

Abner closed his door and dialed the special number he had for the White House. The President himself took the call when he heard the nature of it.

"Abner, I'll call the news conference. I can guarantee you they'll carry it if I call it. We'll need to get Julie here, and I'll send CIA agents to handle that. I'll have them call you and arrange it. I'm sick, hearing this. I've known Victor Gilbert for many years, and his daughter. I'm sure she must be terrified," he said and hung up.

The next call was to Brett. "Abner here, I take it Powell hasn't arrived yet?"

"Not yet. I expect him shortly, though. Any news?" Brett asked, making sure Julie wasn't in hearing range.

"Yes, a news conference on Wednesday at the White House. President himself is calling it. The two guys we arrested at the hotel are cooperating. Scared after what happened to Amici and Denato. We're letting them call their attorney, so Amman isn't tripped to it, but no bail. Please tell Frank the change in plans? I'll let you know the final arrangements when we have them. Then Julie will be off your hands," Abner told him.

Brett felt sick when he heard that. "Abner, I'm coming with her. I don't intend to let her out of my sight. If I can, I intend to have her on my hands for a long time," Brett told him.

Abner chuckled. "I wondered about that. Good luck, son, I'm pulling for you."

Julie came into his den shortly after he hung up. "Was that Frank? Is he almost here?" she asked nervously.

"No, Abner was looking for him," Brett told her. "Don't worry, he'll be here soon."

Julie couldn't seem to settle down. The wait for Frank to arrive seemed interminable. Brett was busy with something in his den, so Julie finally sought out Mary in the kitchen.

"I think I'm going to go nuts if he doesn't get here soon," she said, and plunked down at the table.

"Come help me roll out the scones then, it'll keep you busy," Mary told her and pointed to a lump of dough on the counter.

"Okay; I've never made scones before, are they hard to do?"

"Not really. I'll let you mix up the next batch. I like to do lots and freeze them. Today we'll have some nice hot ones when Frank arrives." Mary showed Julie how to pat out the dough and cut it.

When those were in the oven, she instructed Julie on mixing the next batch. "This is fun, I think I'm going to do these a lot from now on," she said.

They were just finished and ready to pop them in the oven when the doorbell rang. Julie wiped her hands and was running to the door when Brett caught her arm.

"Go into my den and stay there until I know who it is," he told her, and turned her toward the den.

Brett looked out the window and saw a woman and a man, but couldn't be sure who it was. The woman held up her identification and Brett opened the door.

"Sorry, but I can't take any chances," he told them. Mary came out of the kitchen and took their coats.

"I'll have some coffee and scones right out."

"I'm Brett Rowan, I take it you're Frank Powell," Brett asked shaking his hand.

"Yes, thanks again for taking care of Julie. Where is she?" he asked.

"I'll get her," Brett said but before he could turn around Julie flew into Frank's arms.

"I'm so glad to see you!" she managed to get out before she broke down. Frank held her until she quieted then led her to the couch.

"I'm Agent Danville... Rita Danville, it's a pleasure to meet you, Sheriff, Abner speaks highly of you."

"Thanks for helping us here, Ms. Danville. I really appreciate it," Brett told her.

"Please call me Rita. You have a lovely place here, Sheriff."

"Thanks, and you can call me Brett. Why don't we have a seat in the kitchen and let them visit a bit, before we get down to business," Brett said and led the way to the kitchen.

Mohammed Amman was not happy. The men sent to eliminate Julie Gilbert in the hotel had not returned or reported in. They'd been sent out on Saturday and this was now Monday morning. Never had this happened to him before. Parson was not the only one worried.

"Has there been no word at all from them? Has there been anything on the news regarding Julie Gilbert?" he barked at his assistant.

"No Sir, we've heard nothing and we can't locate them."

Finally, at noon, Thomas Raines called him. "I just got a phone call from Ricky Moran and Jimbo Morelli. The FBI arrested them at the hotel Saturday and just now allowed them to call. Any special instructions?"

"Yes, get them out of there and have them brought to me immediately! I don't want them saying a word," Amman ordered.

Raines hung up and made a phone call to the State Attorney's office.

"I understand you're holding two of my clients? They were arrested on Saturday but just now allowed a phone call. I want to speak to them immediately," he informed the man on the phone.

"Mr. Raines, it is within the rights of the FBI when investigating a matter of national security to hold someone as long as necessary before allowing attorneys to be present. You may see them anytime you wish," he replied back.

An hour later, he was sitting in a room with Moran and Morelli.

"What did you do to bungle this? Amman is not happy," he informed them.

"It was a set up. We got trapped," was the reply.

"Fine, I'll see about bail, and then Amman wants to see you immediately."

"We're having an arraignment hearing in an hour. The judge will decide on bail, but due to the nature of the charges, I doubt you'll get it. Murder of a U.S. Senator and attempted murder of his daughter, on top of breaking and entering, are charges that most judges would never grant bail for," the State Attorney told him.

Several hours later, that proved to be true. The judge adamantly refused to grant bail.

"Suspects are to be held pending trial." His gavel sounded, and Ricky and Jimbo were led away, both breathing a sigh of relief.

Raines hated calling Amman, but knew he had no choice.

"I did my best, sir, but there was no bail set. They're being charged with murdering Senator Victor Gilbert. I don't know where they came up with that; nothing's been reported about it."

Amman sat back in his chair and paled. Something had gone drastically wrong. None of their plans seemed to be working. He'd have to make one more concerted effort to prevent Julie Gilbert from ever saying a word.

Chapter Nine

Amman hung up on Raines and made a few more calls. "I want you to go back over the road where we know she last traveled. She may have had more money than what we think and paid for gas along the way. Start checking this area; maybe that was her at the funeral home and she got away. Check hotels, friends, everywhere. Go as far as you have to... I don't care what state it is. I want her found and destroyed," he ordered and slammed the phone down.

Abner listened silently to the report about the courtroom appearance. "It's time we make sure Julie's protected. I want agents constantly in Clifton Forge and at Brett's until we move her on Wednesday morning. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir, we'll have people there in two hours," his assistant replied.

Abner picked up the phone to let Brett and Frank know of the new plan.

Frank Powell listened in shock as Julie related the entire story of what had happened with her and Robert Parson. Finally, she concluded and laid her head back on the couch.

"Julie, I'm so sorry this happened. You're right, it's serious and there's danger out there for you.

However, we do have a plan to fix it and get rid of the danger. Why don't we join the others and we can have some coffee and talk about it?" Frank said, standing up.

"All right, I'll be there in a minute," said Julie, getting up as well. She felt tense and scared and wasn't sure she wanted to hear what the plan was. Her plan would be to somehow change her identity and leave before all the others were hurt.

Frank walked into the kitchen and sat down, taking the coffee Mary offered him thankfully. He turned to Brett and said, "I think I've been brought fully up to speed now, but I don't think she's going to like the plan. She's skittish and she can be stubborn; has been her whole life. Before she joins us I do want to ask you some questions," he told Brett, sizing him up.

"I figured you would, so let me help you. I'm in love with her. She knows it and knows that I'm not pushing her until she's ready and can trust me. However, I don't intend to let her out of my sight until I'm sure she's safe. The news conference is now Wednesday at the White House. I'm coming along with her," Brett replied.

Frank smiled. "I pretty much thought that was the story. I think Julie feels the same way, but is too afraid right now to admit it."

They had no further time for conversation, as Julie came into the room.

Mary excused herself to make up the spare rooms and Frank started the conversation.

"Julie, you need to tell the public exactly what happened and what's going on with the oil cartel."

"NOOOOOO!" she yelled. "I'm not going to do that, it would mean my death and all of yours too. I refuse."

"Julie, settle down and hear us out," Brett said sternly.

Julie glared at him and stayed on her feet. Brett pulled her down on his lap and held her. "Now listen!" he ordered.

Frank smiled and continued, "I'll let Brett fill you in on the next part, since he was the last one Abner talked to."

Brett sighed and tried not to concentrate on Julie trembling in his arms. "This isn't good Julie, but there were two men who broke into the hotel room last Saturday where you were supposedly staying. They were armed with a syringe that contained poison that would kill you instantly and appear as though you'd had a massive heart attack," Brett said and paused. "They were apprehended and have since decided to cooperate with us. They admit to using the same chemical to kill your father. His death was supposed to be a lure to get you out in the open so they could kill you, too. They thought they'd succeeded."

Julie had tears in her eyes and struggled to get up. "That proves that none of you are safe. I have to get away from you, I do!" she cried.

"Julie, you aren't going anywhere. Abner informed the President and he's calling a press conference for Wednesday evening. You're going to tell your story. Once it's out in the open, Parson is finished and you're safe. CIA agents will be with you at all times guarding you," Brett finished.

Julie slumped against Brett and he relaxed his hold, but she used that moment to charge out of his arms and run for the door. Rita stopped her. "I'm sorry Julie, but you can't leave, they're right."

"I won't do it! I won't and you can't make me. It's not safe and everyone will die. I won't... I hate you for trying to make me," Julie screamed,

stamped her foot, fled up the stairs and slammed her bedroom door shut.

"That went well. Last time I saw that performance, she was six and didn't want to go to school," said Frank, shaking his head.

Brett sat still with a stony look on his face. "I don't know what happened then, but I do know what's going to happen now. I'll not allow her to behave like that. Excuse me, but Miss Julie and I are going to have a 'discussion' about her behavior. We'll be back and finish this.

Mary passed Brett as he left the kitchen. "Please see that they have what they need. I'll be back in a bit."

Mary nodded; she'd heard the outbreak and figured what the discussion was going to be about. She poured Frank more coffee and set a plate of scones on the table before sitting down to join him.

"Don't worry about her. Brett is a wonderful man and head over heels in love with her. He won't let her be harmed in any way."

Frank laughed, "I know, but I think Julie's bottom's going to feel a bit different about things, if I'm not mistaken."

When the phone rang, Brett hadn't returned so Mary answered it. "Sheriff Rowan isn't available, but I'll put Mr. Powell on," she told the caller.

Frank took the phone and listened to Abner tell him about the protection. "I think it would be best if Rita and I left here in my disguise tonight. I don't want to call any undue attention to us," Frank told him.

"No, don't change the plan. They won't be able to trip to it that fast. I'm more concerned with tomorrow and Wednesday. Have Brett call me when he's 'available'. I guess things aren't going smoothly?" asked Abner.

"Julie's balking a bit. Brett's discussing it with her right now," Frank told him and laughed.

"I can imagine. I know Brett pretty well and know just what form that discussion's likely taking. I'll see you tomorrow," Abner said and hung up.

Rita had been on her cell phone at the same time as Frank. She hung up and asked him, "Did Abner fill you in?"

"Yes, I guess we're having company."

Amman's orders resulted in immediate commands for several men to start searching everywhere for Julie. Once again they swarmed over Richmond, watching her closest friends' apartments. Another group started on the road again, checking closer towns in case she'd doubled back. By Monday night, they'd not turned up a clue. Amman was not pleased when he heard the report.

"Tomorrow, start early. She has to be somewhere," he ordered. His next call was to Parson.

"The men sent to take care of the Gilbert woman in the hotel, are in custody. Apparently the FBI was waiting for them. We have no idea where she is at this point. I want you to found out what the FBI involvement is and I want that information first thing in the morning," Amman told him and hung up, giving him no time to reply.

Robert Parson placed a call to his assistant. "Call your person who has ties to information at the FBI. I want to know what their interest in Julie Gilbert is, and I need it immediately."

Brett opened Julie's bedroom door to find her still in a fit, tossing things around her room.

"Sort of childish isn't it?" he commented dryly, dodging a pillow.

"I hate you! Get out!" she screamed at him and tossed a glass at him. Brett caught it and put it down.

"Julie, stop this instant! I want to talk to you calmly," he said.

"NO, I don't want to talk about this," she screamed back.

Brett reached her in two strides, sat down on the bed and pulled her over his lap. "I would much rather have talked calmly, but since you insist on behaving like a spoiled brat, I guess this is the only way to get through to you. Let me know when you want to talk," said Brett as he flipped up her skirt and pulled her panties down. He figured it wouldn't take many spanks for her to break and he was right.

Julie sobbed and collapsed in a heap on his lap, crying hysterically. When she calmed down, he righted her and held her. "Ready to talk?" he said softly in her ear.

"I'm scared. I know I'll get killed, and if not I'll be alone again. I just can't do it," Julie trembled in his arms.

"Julie, I'll be with you the entire time. I'm not leaving you, Frank will be there, the President will be there and CIA agents will guard you. You'll not be alone and you *will* be safe," he told her again.

Julie looked up at him, defiance once again building. "Yes, but after, you'll go home and back to your pre-Julie messing up your life, and Frank will go back to his life, and I'll be alone with no one," she said.

Brett stiffened at her words. "I have half a notion to get that hairbrush and light a serious fire on that bottom, woman," he said and sighed. "Julie, I've told you I love you. I told Frank that this morning. I don't intend to come back here without you. If I'd wanted to, I could've turned you over to the FBI as soon as we knew what you were up against. You could've been in their custody for a while now, but I didn't want to do that. I wanted you here in my life and I always will. You aren't going to be alone again, but you have to trust me. I want you to love me like I love you, but that's up to you."

"I'm sorry, I did behave like a brat. You really should've spanked me harder," Julie told him and leaned into him.

"I can still do that, so don't push it," Brett replied.

Julie hung on to him for a moment then raised her head and looked him in the eyes. "Brett, I do love you. I have for a while, but was afraid to trust myself. I do trust you. Do you mean it that you'll always be here for me?"

Brett answered her by kissing her deeply. After a moment he broke the kiss and told her, "Julie, I do mean it. When this is over we can discuss plans for the future, but you have to do this, so we have a future. Are you ready to go back down?"

"Yes, I guess so. I need to apologize to them too," she said, blushing.

"Yes, that's a great idea," Brett said and hugged her hard. "Let's go."

They walked back into the kitchen holding hands and Frank smiled at them.

"I'm sorry I made such a scene," Julie told Frank and Rita. "I'm ready to listen now, but I'm scared."

"I know Julie, but it'll be fine," Frank said and turned to Brett. "Abner called and has decided to send in troops. There are going to be agents here in about two hours. They're going undercover around town, too. Will be here until CIA shows up to take you both to Washington."

Julie looked stricken and squeezed Brett's hand hard.

"Good, that'll be comforting," said Brett. "Julie, it's a good thing, let's sit down and finish going over things."

Julie sat and Frank explained more. "The President's press secretary will start the news conference. The President will speak and tell the world that Victor was in reality murdered in an attempt to get you in the open and murder you. He'll most likely call on Abner to explain the details of that. Abner will then ask you to tell what happened and who's involved. If necessary, I'll talk about the phone taps on my lines and the men watching my house."

"What happens after that? Won't they still want to kill me for revenge?" Julie asked her lip trembling.

"You'll be guarded and I imagined arrests will take place almost simultaneously. They won't risk killing you, because it would be obvious who was behind it. I think our oilman will leave the country hurriedly. You'll damage any attempt they may have had on making deals."

Julie sighed and agreed. "I'll do what you think is best."

"Good, then we'll let Abner know," said Frank. "Brett, may I use your office to call him?"

"Absolutely," Brett showed him where it was.

Julie got up from the table and went to sit in the rocker, tears slowly spilling down her cheeks.

Frank was talking to Abner, so Brett left and returned to the kitchen. Only Rita and Mary were there. "Where's Julie?" asked Brett.

"I think she might be in the living room; she left right after you did. She's a bit upset," Mary told him.

Brett immediately went to the living room and saw her sitting in the rocker crying silently.

He crouched down in front of her. "What's wrong, Julie?"

"I'm so scared. I trust you and I know that they're doing all they can, but you don't know Robert and his connections," Julie wiped at a tear.

Brett picked her up, sat down holding her and rocked. It seemed to always comfort her. "Shhh...I'll be with you, and I promise I won't let him near you."

He rocked her for a few minutes until he felt her head slump against him. He stood up, placed her gently on the couch and covered her up.

When he went back to the kitchen, Mary asked him, "Is she okay?"

"She's sleeping. This has been a hard day for her and she hasn't been sleeping all that well. Hopefully a nap will help her," he said.

Frank returned and reported that all was set for his return and switch back early the next morning. The CIA agents would arrive early Wednesday morning and take them back to Washington. They should be ready to leave at eight in the morning. He'd just finished talking when there was a rap at the kitchen door and two men could be seen standing outside.

When Brett got close to the door, they pulled their ID's out and showed them through the

window. Rita had been out of the room and now came back in. "It's okay, they're part of us," she told Brett.

"Morning, Sir," they greeted Brett and Frank. "Is there someplace we can conceal our car? We don't want anyone to know we're here," one of the men said.

Brett showed them the barn and one went to move the car and the other came in. "We'll try and stay out of your way as much as possible. Is everyone inside now?"

"Yes, Julie Gilbert is sleeping in the living room at the moment, and the rest of us are here. Mary will be leaving at four and returning in the morning. Frank and Rita are staying over but leaving early tomorrow morning. I'll be here and of course so will Julie," Brett told him.

"Good, we'll just take a look around now and acquaint ourselves," he said and left the room.

Brett went to make sure Julie was okay and she was still sleeping. He sat down with her so if she did wake up and see the agents she wouldn't be frightened. She was sleeping soundly so Brett just sat quietly with her, until one of the agents motioned him back into the kitchen.

"Everything looks good. I'm Joe Brown, senior agent in charge and this is Ron Garfield. One or the other of us will be on duty at all times. I noticed there's a couch in your office. If it's not a problem we'll use that to sleep on when we can," he said.

Brett shook both their hands. "Help yourselves. I'll have some blankets and pillows brought down. It opens into a bed if that'd be more comfortable, and there's a bath right off the office."

"That's great. We'll try to stay out of your way as much as possible."

"That's fine but not necessary. Join us for meals, it'll be fine," Brett told them.

Abner listened intently to the report his assistant was giving to the group of agents.

"It appears there are probes from Parson's office as to the whereabouts of Julie Gilbert, a lot of activity last night and again this morning. They believe we have her hiding somewhere, since the two men were arrested at the hotel. What do we want to do?" he asked.

Abner looked around the table. "This is a tricky one. We can't be sure that somehow the truth won't be leaked if they offer enough money. Any ideas?" he asked.

"Why not let them think we do have her?" one asked.

"The problem with that is they may start scattering, figuring we know what's going on and are about ready to stop them. I'd rather keep them in place until after the news conference," replied Abner.

"We could leak that we really have no idea, that she got away from us at the hotel, too?"

"I like it," Abner told them. "Okay, use the same person we used last time."

Robert Parson sat at his desk looking as though he hadn't slept. It had been a long night and so far no word of anything at the FBI. He was just about to pick up his phone and raise hell again, when it rang.

"It's about time," he yelled into it. "Took way too long; next time I want immediate results." He

slammed the phone down and took a long drink of water, then dialed Amman.

"I do hope you have something good to report," Amman said dryly.

"Word from my informant is that she ditched them at the hotel too. The main reason the agents were there was to take her into custody, see why she ran and what she knew. Apparently, somehow she dodged them. They're actively seeking her now also," he reported.

"Keep on it. I want to know the minute they locate her," Amman told him.

"Of course I will. I just hope they have some fun with her before they kill her. Make up for the trouble she's caused," Robert told him with a hateful ugly sneer on his face.

He told his informant to keep getting information, then called his office and told them he wouldn't be in that day. Sleep was all he craved at the moment.

The rest of Monday was spent chatting and remembering old times between Frank and Julie. Brett hadn't seen Julie smile so much since he'd rescued her. It'd been quiet and there were no reports of unusual activity in town, so Brett was relieved.

Julie made up a shopping list and sent Mary out to pick up groceries. She intended to do a lot more of the cooking now that she was better. Tonight she'd make Chicken Kiev, always a favorite of Frank's. As she started preparing dinner, she suddenly had Brett and Frank hanging around watching and getting in the way. "Okay guys, out! For the next hour or so, this is *my* kitchen!" Julie ordered them.

Laughing, Brett and Frank left the kitchen. Julie smiled to herself as she heard them talking in the living room. She was so glad that they were getting along. Frank had never quite approved of any of the other men she'd dated. This was a good sign and melted any reserve toward Brett that Julie may have harbored. She made up her mind that tonight was going to be different than any other night they'd had so far.

The news conference was set and would be announced late Tuesday. Abner worried that as soon as it was, the hunt for Julie would take on epic proportions. He knew there were men near Clifton Forge asking questions, and it would only be a matter of time before they were in Clifton Forge. He picked up the phone and dialed the White House. "Yes, Mr. President, I think we should move them on Tuesday afternoon. I can arrange a safe house for them to stay in until Wednesday evening," said Abner.

"I'll arrange for the agents to stay with them. Thank you, Abner, for handling this," the President said and hung up.

Abner made a few calls to arrange things and then called Brett.

"There's been a small change in plans. The news conference is going to be announced tomorrow afternoon, and I think that's going to increase the effort triple fold to find Julie. There're already men in the surrounding towns asking questions. I don't even want to risk them perhaps finding out she is there. The pick up will be tomorrow afternoon about two o'clock. Prepare to stay away for at least five days. I doubt it'll take that long, but just in case," he said, and hung up.

Brett turned to Frank and relayed the news. "We won't be too far behind you. I don't know where we'll be, but call me tomorrow evening on my cell and we can check any other changes."

"I'm really glad they're moving this up. I'd worry too much about Julie being found, even though there're agents here, I'd just feel better about it."

"I'm not sure July will think it's a good thing though," Brett replied.

"I'll let you handle that. I think you have a way of convincing her that I don't," Frank said, laughing.

Julie beamed happily, listening to the praise for her dinner. "Thank you, this could go to my head you know," she said, smiling.

"It's sincere. You could make a career out of it," Brett said enthusiastically, savoring the last bite of chicken.

Julie started clearing the table but Joe and Ron jumped up and did it for her. She'd made a chocolate peanut butter pie for desert and served it with chocolate sauce. There were moans of pleasure as they dug into it and finished the entire pie. The men did the dishes so Julie was able to sit in the living room and sip on her coffee and relax.

Brett and Frank joined her once the kitchen was clean and the others retired to the office. After chatting for a bit, Frank got up and announced, "I have to get a really early start tomorrow, so I'll say good night now. I don't want you getting up early tomorrow Julie, I'll see you on Wednesday. Please don't worry, it's going to be fine." He hugged her tightly and went up the stairs.

"I hate to see him go," Julie said, a bit misty eyed. "Are you staying home with me tomorrow?" she asked Brett.

"There's been a small change of plans," Brett told her and watched her face grow troubled.

"What now?"

"We're leaving tomorrow afternoon instead of Wednesday morning. Abner feels it's safer. We'll be staying in a safe house in Washington with the CIA agents."

Julie bit her lip nervously and asked, "You're coming then too, aren't you?"

"You bet. I told you I'm not letting you out of my sight and I'm not," Brett said, pulling her closer and kissing her.

Julie fell into the kiss and when they paused, looked up at him, "Can we take this upstairs? I want you Brett, and I want you now!"

Chapter Ten

"Are you sure? No doubts?" Brett asked her, his heart hammering and other parts getting his attention as well.

"Yes, I love you and want to be with you totally," Julie told him.

Brett scooped her up, carried her to his room and shut the door before standing her in front of him.

He caught her lips in a kiss, slowly inserted his tongue and deepened the kiss. Julie sighed in contentment as his tongue tangled with hers. Slowly he started undressing her, kissing every part of her body as it was available to him. When his lips settled on her nipples, her sigh changed to a moan and her knees grew weak.

Brett moved her to the bed and finished stripping her, then slowly kissed his way down her body, exploring her most intimate places. Julie writhed and moaned, "Brett, please make love to me, please!"

"Patience love," he answered her as he undressed. He was rock hard and as soon as he was freed from his slacks Julie managed to take hold of him and started massaging. Brett moaned his pleasure but removed her hands, nudged her knees apart and entered her.

Their first climax came faster than Brett would have liked and after he pulled her on top of him, he held her tight. "Julie, as soon as we can I want you

to marry me. I know this is probably not the best time to propose, but I love you so much, I don't want to wait."

"Yes, I'll marry you," Julie told him and kissed him. Shortly they were once again doing the dance of lovers. By the time it was dawn, they were just falling asleep.

Frank and Rita were both dressed and downstairs talking quietly to Joe and Ron. They said goodbye and left. Frank chuckled to himself all the way to the airport thinking of Julie's obviously empty room.

It was almost nine before Brett awoke the next morning. The warm bundle in his arms was still sound asleep. Slowly he got out of bed and went to shower and dress. He decided to let Julie sleep a bit longer, as it was going to be a long day for her. When he was finished he went to her room and got her robe and some clothes.

"Morning," said Julie when he got back. She was awake and curled up under the covers.

Brett put the clothes down, went over and sat on the bed, scooping her into his arms and kissing her.

"Hey, I'm not dressed," Julie said when she could breathe again, grabbing for the sheet.

"I think I've seen every inch of you Julie, so don't get modest," Brett told her kissing her again. "Time to get up though, I smell breakfast and we have to get packed and ready."

Sighing loudly, Julie grabbed her robe from him and ran for the bathroom, avoiding the swat he aimed at her. Brett laughed and went down to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Mary," he said as he poured a cup of coffee.

"I was wondering if you two were going to sleep the entire day. Joe and Ron have both eaten," she said, scooping eggs and biscuits onto his plate.

"We're leaving this afternoon. I'm not sure how long we'll be gone, but would you continue to come here every day? I'll let you know as soon as I can when we'll be back. I'd like everything to appear as normal as possible," Brett asked her.

"That's fine. It'll give me a chance to really clean," Mary agreed.

Julie came into the kitchen about fifteen minutes later, looking as calm and rested as she ever had. She was smiling, which was seldom seen, too.

"Morning," she greeted Mary and Brett.

Brett pulled her to him and kissed her, much to Mary's surprise. Something was definitely going on now.

"Mary, you may as well be the first to know, Julie and I are getting married as soon as we can," said Brett.

"Oh that's wonderful news! Congratulations to both of you!" Mary hugged Julie and Brett both.

When Brett was finished eating, he got up and told them, "I'm going to check in with the office and make sure everything is okay. Julie, you need to pack. Take what you think you may need for five days. I'm not sure how long we'll be gone."

The trip to the airport was uneventful and Frank and Rita weren't even given a second glance. Rita had to report to security and show her credentials to be allowed to keep her gun on the plane. Finally, they were settled in their seats relaxing, waiting for takeoff.

"I'll be glad when tomorrow's over. I just hope Julie doesn't break, or that nothing happens before then," Frank told her.

"I think she's pretty strong. With Brett along, she'll be fine. He seems to have a good influence on her. They really just met a few weeks ago? It seems they've known each other for ages," she commented.

"Yes, he saved her when she got stuck in the blizzard. Most likely she would've died otherwise. I do like him; he's good for her," Frank replied.

The plane landed a half hour later and they picked up their rental car and drove to the funeral home. They laughed when they saw all the news media lined up waiting for the arrival of the dignitaries, among them Frank Powell.

"Let's see if we can see 'me' arrive; I think that would be interesting," Frank said.

"Yes, but from inside, not out here," Rita climbed out of the car and waited for him to join her. To the average eye, they looked like all the other people arriving. Once they were inside they made their way to the back room they'd left from, and Abner was waiting for them.

"How did it go so far?" he asked.

"Fine, no problems at all. No one even looked at us. Can we watch the limo arrive?" Frank asked.

"You'll have to catch it on TV later; they're already inside and he should be back here momentarily," Abner told him.

Moments later, his double came into the room and they got busy changing outfits. Frank was finally Frank again, and left the room to continue to greet all who came. Abner watched on the monitors both inside and out and no one seemed the wiser.

Frank cordially greeted all the dignitaries as they appeared, until Robert Parson showed up.

"I'm so sorry for this loss to our country," Robert said.

Frank used all his will power not to just punch him. "Yes, it is a great loss," he responded.

"I'm also very worried about Julie, you haven't heard anything, have you?" Robert asked, his face showing concern.

Frank wanted to lash out at him, but used great restraint and forced his answer, "No, I haven't." He immediately turned to the next one in line, thereby ending the conversation with Parson.

The rest of the service went as planned and when it was finally over, Frank shook hands with the President as he was leaving. The President leaned close to Frank and whispered, "I will see you Wednesday evening?"

"Yes, I'll be there," Frank replied. The President clapped him on the shoulder, nodded and left.

Robert had observed the whole exchange and for some reason it bothered him. He didn't think that the President was very close to Frank Powell... but this made them seem friends. He left pondering what could that brief conversation have been about. It also puzzled him that Frank was unwilling to discuss anything about Julie with him. Perhaps he should phone Amman and talk to him.

Amman was not pleased to hear from Robert, as he had nothing new to tell him. "I've told you the phones at Powell's are bugged. There's been no contact from Julie or anyone remotely close to her, mentioning her. The man knows nothing! You will refrain from calling me unless you have something to add," he barked into the phone and once again hung up. He would be eternally grateful when the

man was gone. He'd been such a fool to get involved with him.

Bright and early Tuesday morning, the men looking for Julie were out combing the towns again. Some had even ventured far off the highway down remote roads, wondering if she could have gotten to one of those towns. They had no luck at all. It was almost two o'clock and one team was approaching Clifton Forge. It was time to stop for something to eat and they decided this was the nearest town, and they hadn't covered it yet.

While eating their lunch, they overheard two men at the counter talking. "Did you see that thing in the news over the weekend, that car that blew up?"

"Yeah, I did, what about it? Nobody we knew was in it," his friend replied.

"No... but I'd seen those men here last week. Weren't they the ones showing the picture of that missing woman around, asking questions?"

"Maybe, I didn't pay that much attention since she ain't been around here," he replied.

"Yeah, well it just struck me, cause I'd seen them." They both shrugged and continued eating.

The two men at the table looked at each other. "Do you think maybe this was where they were arrested? Maybe they were on to something."

"Time to check in, see if anyone knows anything," the other one commented, dialing his cell.

Tom told Brett that things were quiet. A few strangers in town, but he figured they were the agents Brett had warned him about.

"If anyone else shows up, let me know. We'll be leaving here at two, but Mary will keep her routine up. I'm not sure when I'll be back, but I'll keep in touch. Call me anytime and leave a message if I'm not able to answer," Brett told him and hung up.

He went upstairs, packed and looked in on Julie. She was about done packing so he sat and waited for her to finish.

"I wish we had time for a quick er... nap, but it's almost one and they'll be here in an hour. Let's get some lunch," he said, picking up the cases and taking them downstairs.

"I'm not sure how much I can eat," Julie replied.

"Try and eat something, I'm not sure when we'll get dinner," Brett said, hugging her to him.

Promptly at two, a car pulled up in front of the house and a man got out. Brett had his gun at the ready and watched as he approached the front door. Joe was on duty - he motioned Brett behind him and opened the door.

"Agent Silverstein," the man said, presenting his credentials. Joe looked them over and motioned him in.

Brett moved forward and shook the man's hand. "I'm Sheriff Brett Rowan, I'll be accompanying Julie Gilbert," he told the man.

"Yes, I know. Are you both ready to go? I have some last minute instructions, if you'll have her join us," he announced in a dry serious tone.

Julie had been in the office and came out when she heard her name.

"I'm Julie Gilbert, I'm ready to go. I want to get this over with," she informed the man.

"Good, then we'll be off in a minute. I have another agent with me in the car. Until we get past Clifton Forge, I'm going to ask you both to stay down in the back seat. I don't want anyone seeing

you. When I tell you it's clear, you may get up. You must follow all my instructions. I'm here to protect you, but that requires you to follow orders. Is that understood?"

Julie looked at Brett who answered, "Yes, perfectly."

"Sheriff, I would appreciate it if you would keep the firearm out of sight," he told Brett.

"No problem, but I'm keeping it on me," Brett told him.

"Ok, if you're ready, let's go," he said, picking up the suitcases. "Officer Brown, I've been told to ask you to call your office after we leave."

Brett helped Julie on with her coat and noticed she was trembling slightly. "Don't worry, it'll soon be over," he whispered in her ear and hugged her.

They got in the car, and when told to, Brett lay down on the seat and pulled Julie next to him. It wasn't the most comfortable ride, but it felt good holding her, and seemed to calm her.

Twenty minutes later, they were given the all clear and sat up.

"We should be there in about two hours, if either one of you need to stop, give me plenty of warning," Silverstein said and then returned to watching the road and rearview mirror.

Amman listened to the man on the phone quietly and when he finished his report, told him, "Tell them to keep their eyes open. They should go to the police station and say they're related to Amici and would like to speak to the Sheriff. Perhaps he'll give them more information."

The phone was disconnected and Amman called Parson.

He didn't bother greeting Parson, but immediately asked him, "Did Julie have any connections in Clifton Forge, Virginia?"

"She has no relatives at all. Frank Gilbert was her only relation," he answered.

"No close friends she ever mentioned from college?" Amman asked.

"No, why?" Parson asked curiously. Amman hung up without answering him.

Robert placed another call to his man with the FBI connections. "Any further word?"

"Nothing, last I heard were they were still looking for her. If anything changes I'll let you know."

Tom smiled when the desk sergeant told him there were two men here to see Sheriff Rowan.

"Did they say what they wanted?" he asked.

"Something to do with Amici, one says he's his cousin."

"Ok, send them in," Tom told him.

Tom stood and greeted the two sad men who entered his office. He motioned them to sit and sat back down behind his desk. "What can I do for you folks?"

The trip to the safe house was uneventful. It was almost five o'clock when they reached their destination. The car had pulled off at rest areas frequently, checking to see if any others pulled off with them. No one had, and the agents declared them safe.

Julie got out of the car and looked around. "We're not in D.C. - where are we?" she asked Silverstein.

"Ma'am, we're outside the city, that's all I can say. Now, please, let's go inside," he responded.

Brett took Julie's arm and led her in. They entered a nice comfortable Georgian style home, typical for the area. A woman greeted them and introduced herself as the housekeeper.

"I'll be here at all times, as will at least one of the agents. You won't be aware of our presence, but should you need anything there's a button in every room, you only need push it," she said, and showed them the one in the room where they were.

Their luggage was carried upstairs and placed in two rooms across the hall from each other. Brett and Julie were left alone to unpack, the housekeeper telling them that dinner would be at seven.

Julie had a stricken look on her face as the housekeeper left. Her face fell and she started slowly into the room.

Brett looked at Julie and laughed. He went and got her case and placed it in his room.

"Ok?" he asked.

Her smile returned and she hugged him.

"I think we need a nap before dinner. It's been a long day," he said, pulling her into the room and closing the door.

After the men explained why they were there, Tom sat back in his chair and looked at them.

"Well... see, it's like this. The Sheriff's on vacation and it's the rule, we can't give out information without him," Tom said. Then he leaned across the desk and whispered in his best Southern drawl, "I'll tell ya though, they didn't get caught here. Heard they robbed a place down the road. It's possible he'd tell you something, but I'm not sure.

If you want I can give him a holler on his cell and see."

"That would be most helpful," one said, rolling his eyes at his partner.

"Have a seat in the waiting room and I'll see if I can get him," Tom showed them the door and the chairs.

When they were seated there looking distinctly uncomfortable, Tom closed his door and dialed Brett. He had no idea where he was, or if he would even be able to take the call.

Brett was kissing Julie and just about to undress her when his phone rang. He debated not answering it until he saw it was Tom. "Sorry honey, this should just take a minute," Brett told her.

"What's up?" he said, answering the phone.

"I've got two gentlemen here who say they're relatives of Amici; saddened by his death and trying to find out what happened. They want to know if he was arrested here or not. I'm sure they're the follow up crew sent out. Want me to tell them anything?" Tom asked and waited for a response.

"Tom, call Abner and ask him. I don't want to make too many calls from here. Just do what he says and I'll call you later," Brett said and hung up.

Turning back to Julie, Brett pulled her close and kissed her deeply. While he kissed her he undressed her and let his lips and hands roam over her.

"Brett, please don't make me wait," Julie moaned.

He answered by taking one nipple then the other and rolling his tongue around them until Julie felt like she'd melt. Brett laid her on the bed and quickly undressed and joined her. As soon as he thrust into her Julie climaxed and immediately started to build again. Brett soon joined her in a powerful orgasm and collapsed on the bed, pulling her close to him.

They slept for an hour then Brett kissed her awake. "Time to dress for dinner. Come on honey, wake up," he crooned.

Julie opened her eyes and smiled. "I'm so happy, and so tired. Maybe we should just stay in bed," she said, yawning.

Brett answered her by picking her up and carrying her into the bathroom. He turned the shower on and moments later they were both wet and happy.

They were late to dinner, but the housekeeper said nothing, just smiled at them.

Abner listened attentively to Tom explain about the men in the office.

"I don't want to give them any true information at all. Tell them that the sheriff is unreachable," Abner told him.

"I already told them I thought it was another town down the road a piece," Tom said and laughed.

"Ok, keep to that then. I'll alert the team members to keep an eye on them. I've left all of them in place and will for a while. Keep in touch if anything else develops."

Tom called them back in and relayed the news, "Couldn't reach the sheriff but as I told you I think it was something about a robbery, think down the road a piece. Maybe the state guys could shed more light on it. Sheriff is gone for a week, so can't help you more than that."

"Thanks for your efforts," they said.

The two men left the station shaking their heads. "I don't think it's worth staying another minute in this place. I've never seen so many hicks in my life in one place."

They sat in their car and reported another dead end.

Robert Parson paced his office, wondering more and more about the phone call from Amman. He couldn't figure out why he'd ask about a town he never heard of. It was late and he had a cocktail party to attend to, so he called it a day and left.

A few drinks into the party, his spirits were beginning to revive. He'd met a new secretary for one of the other senators. She was young, beautiful and seemed to come from a family with money. Perhaps he'd conquer her once Julie was dead.

He was on his way to the bathroom when he overheard a group talking. "I can't imagine what the big announcement is. Not like the President to call a press conference at the last minute."

Robert stopped dead in his tracks and turned to one of the group. "What's this about a press conference?"

"They just announced it on TV. Heard it on my way here. President is having a press conference tomorrow evening. Apparently he has an important announcement."

Robert didn't know why, but that news vaguely disturbed him.

Abner was busy the next morning checking on the arrangements for that evening and making sure things were quiet in Clifton Forge.

He called Tom to find out if there'd been any further incidents with the two men who visited him.

"No, not a thing, they left town. Perhaps going down the road to try and find where they were arrested and for what," he told him.

"Good, call me if anything out of the ordinary happens," Abner said and hung up.

His next call was to the President. "The arrangements seem to be in order for tonight. What time do you plan on having them arrive?"

"Julie and Brett will be joining me for dinner along with Frank Powell. We're bringing them in the back way so we don't attract attention. Please join us. Dinner will be at six," he told Abner.

"Thank you Sir, I will," Abner replied.

He made sure he had all the files he needed for that evening and then started working on some other cases.

"Brett, I don't think I could eat any dinner at all, least of all with the President. I'm just too nervous," Julie said when Brett told her of the arrangements.

"You'll be fine. It'll be better to be there well ahead of time. How many invitations do you get to have a private dinner with the President? It'll be something to tell our children," Brett told her and kissed her lightly.

Julie sighed and went back to working on her speech for tonight. She wanted to be sure she had all the pertinent information and the right time line. This was important and she wasn't about to blow it. Once she'd agreed to do it, she put her heart and soul into it.

Brett wanted to check with Tom, but he'd been advised only to make absolutely necessary calls. He watched some television while Julie worked away on the computer.

They were going to be picked up at four-thirty for transport to the White House, so they'd have a short afternoon. Julie picked at lunch and seemed to

be getting more and more nervous as the time ticked on.

"Let's go upstairs, I know just the thing to relax you," Brett told her.

Julie smiled and blushed. She had a real good idea what he had in mind and it was more than fine with her.

Chapter Eleven

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Julie smiled and blushed. She had a real good idea what he had in mind and it was more than fine with her.

Once they were in their room, Brett sat on the bed and drew her in front of him. He undid her jeans and lowered them and her panties before flipping her over his knee.

"Wait! I haven't done anything," Julie shrieked, trying to get up.

"I know, this isn't going to be a spanking like the others. I think you'll like this one," Brett said, laughing at her.

Still she tried to squirm away, but he held her firmly. She stopped fighting when his hands began kneading and massaging her bottom. The sensation was quite pleasant and she relaxed over his knee. The first swat took her by surprise and she squirmed again. He followed it by three more gentle ones, then a hard one. When she was about to protest, he started the rubbing and massaging again. This pace kept up until Julie found herself arching for his hand and growing quite hot and wet.

"You are such a good girl, Julie. I knew you'd like this," Brett cooed in her ear.

When she was nice and pink Brett let his fingers wander and Julie moaned. She was enjoying this far more than he'd thought. He smacked her harder

and then massaged her folds again. It didn't take long before she shuddered in a climax and lay limp across his lap. He picked her up and kissed her and removed the rest of her clothing, then his.

They made slow love and both collapsed into each other's arms and fell asleep. When they awoke, it was time to get ready to go. By four o'clock, they were both ready and downstairs with Julie's notes, waiting for their transport.

Silverstein arrived at exactly four-thirty and soon they were in the car on the way to the White House. Julie slumped against Brett and shivered slightly.

"Don't worry, it'll soon be over," he said.

Robert Parson had tried all day to find out through sources what the Press Conference was going to be about, to no avail.

At lunch with some fellow senators, it was all the talk, but no one had a clue.

"I don't think even the Vice President knows. You can usually tell when he's withholding information and he seems to be as baffled as we are. This is really unusual."

Robert called his informant. "Any word from the FBI on Julie Gilbert yet?"

"No, not a word, but I heard there were men in Clifton Forge, Virginia looking for her, but met a dead end. There were some others, not FBI, there, too. I guess they're trying to trace a route she may have taken," he said.

Robert hung up and sat at his desk in thought. Clifton Forge again. What is it about that town that interests both the FBI and Amman? He'd wracked his brain and couldn't think of any connection to Julie there. He shrugged and got back to work. If

there were anything there, surely the FBI or Amman would've found it by now.

The President had Brett and Julie shown to a small sitting room to wait for the others. It wasn't long before both Frank Powell and Abner joined them. The President entered a few moments later.

He walked directly to Julie and took her hands. "I'm so sorry this has happened, but it's the right thing, you're doing. Your father would want you to," he said.

Julie had tears forming in her eyes but thanked him.

"Let's have a cocktail and Abner can fill us in on what will happen right after you speak, Julie."

When they all were served, Abner addressed them, "We have agents watching all the involved parties. We plan on making arrests simultaneously. There will be five arrests and that should take care of all involved parties. I'm sure there may be more as we do a more thorough investigation, but that's what we have at this time."

They discussed the flow of the evening and then went to dinner. Brett squeezed Julie's hand as they left for the dining room. He knew she was getting nervous.

At seven o'clock, Amman received a phone call.

"What? Where did you learn that?" he shouted into the phone.

"You don't have time to argue. There was a leak from the White House. You need to get out of town now. You're being watched, so take your other papers and disguise. There are tickets waiting for you at Dulles."

Before Amman could ask anymore, the phone went dead. He hurried, grabbed his other idea and donned the beard and Arab clothing he kept handy. With a lone suitcase he kept packed for emergencies, he walked out of his office. He immediately noticed the car parked in front of the building with FBI agents in it. It had been a very close call.

Just as the press conference started he was boarding a plane for home.

Dinner was marvelous, and Julie found herself relaxing. The President was a wonderful host and kept the mood light and informal. When they'd finished coffee, he suggested they refresh themselves and it would be time to move to the press room.

Julie took a deep breath and went to the rest room. When she'd repaired her makeup and hair, she came out and found Brett waiting for her. He hugged her tight and placed a soft kiss on her lips. "I don't want to muss your makeup, but will make up for it when we get home," he told her and hugged her hard one more time.

They sat in the anteroom to the pressroom waiting until everyone had arrived and it was time. Finally it was announced they should follow the President. As Julie left the room, she could hear the end of the Press Secretary's instruction to the reporters.

"There will be no questions addressed to anyone until all have spoken. Then there will be a brief, and I mean brief, question and answer period. Please follow the rules," he concluded. The TV lights blinked on and announced, "Thank you for joining us tonight. The President will speak along

with several others regarding recent developments into the death of Senator Gilbert. Ladies and Gentlemen, The President of the United States."

Applause was short, and the President took his position behind the podium. Cameras flashed and Julie squeezed Brett's hand. She could feel the cameras panning them and heard the whispered comments from the press.

"It is a sad announcement I've come to make tonight," the President said. "One of my oldest friends and trusted advisors did not die a natural death. He was injected with a lethal poison that killed him instantly, and mimicked a heart attack or stroke. It was only hours before his funeral that this was discovered conclusively. The reason behind attacking a man who was unable to speak and barely move is even more unconceivable," he said, pausing.

"His daughter, Julie Gilbert, disappeared several weeks ago. Though it seemed mysterious, it also appeared to be voluntary. It is true she left voluntarily, but only because she had discovered some things that put her life at risk. She was beaten and threatened... and rather than do the immoral things others were doing, she fled. Fortunately she found a safe haven and has been kept safe while the pieces of the puzzle were put in place. It was in an attempt to lure her to reveal herself so she could be eliminated, that her father was killed. I'll now turn over the podium to Abner Jones, Senior Manager of the FBI Undercover Unit."

Abner stood and approached the podium. Julie was beginning to shake a bit and Brett rubbed her hands to quiet her.

"Thank you, Mr. President. Allow me to fill you in on some background information. We have been watching certain members of our government and

certain members of foreign oil companies as they met on regularly occasions. This group was infiltrated and we were about to shut them down when Miss Gilbert provided us with information that would guarantee their prosecution. She has been under our protection for some time. Arrests have already been made, and more will be made this evening, immediately following the conclusion of this event. Miss Gilbert will give her statement, but she was involved with Senator Robert Parson, as many of you are aware. She walked in on a meeting and overheard some damning things. When he realized she knew what was going on... he ordered her to support it and throw her father's support behind it as well. When she refused, he beat her senseless. She left and ran. It was that that triggered efforts by an oil cartel to have her killed. Mr. Mohammed Amman is the leader of that cartel and he and Mr. Parson will both be placed under arrest tonight. You will be given a list of the others involved. Now I'd like Miss Gilbert to tell you in her words what happened and what she overheard," Abner concluded and waited for Julie to join him.

Julie stood and walked to the podium. There were a lot of murmurs in the group but as soon as she started speaking there was dead silence.

In a calm, clear voice Julie said, "I'm Julie Gilbert and I'm thankful to be able to be here tonight to speak to you. For a long time, I didn't think I would live much longer." She proceeded to tell her story of the pressure Robert put on her to have her say her father endorsed his views. She told of him bragging that he was paid well to vote for the things he did, and that he planned to have her say her father agreed with his views and was offering funds to make sure he continued. When

she got to the night he beat her, she choked up and paused for a moment. She took a sip of water and continued.

"I did the only thing I could think of... I ran. I was afraid to go to anyone I knew, I just grabbed what I could and got in my car and left. I encountered a blizzard and my car was running out of gas and breaking down. I pulled off the road and was stranded. Fortunately I was found, however I became ill and it was a week before my story came out. The FBI was contacted and that's why I'm here tonight," Julie said and with tears running down her face left and resumed her seat.

Brett put his arm around her and held her tight, whispering to her.

The President took the podium again and asked Frank Powell to tell them what he knew.

Frank spoke only briefly and told of the taps on his phones and the men watching him.

"The FBI arranged for doubles so that I could see Julie and prepare her to do this. It is a sad day for our country when elected officials behave in such a despicable manner. I would also like to set the record straight on one thing... Julie never was engaged to Mr. Parson. That was solely something he spread about to lend weight to his possible association with her father. Thank you!" Frank concluded and sat back down.

The President once again stood at the podium. "We'll entertain five minutes of questions, one per reporter, please," he said.

There were many questions for both Abner and Julie but fortunately the Press Secretary ended it precisely on time.

They left the room and made their way back to the White House sitting room they started at. Julie

slumped down on the couch, exhausted. Brett gathered her into his arms and held her.

Abner smiled at them before saying, "We want you to leave now, before they have a chance to figure out where you came in and follow you. It's going to be necessary to once again hide in the back seat."

Brett was grateful they could leave right away. He wasn't sure how much more Julie could take. Within two minutes they were again laying on the back seat with Julie in his arms and after fifteen minutes, Silverstein told them they could sit up. Brett sat up and realized Julie was asleep. He let her lie in his lap and sleep the rest of the way back to the house.

Robert Parson finished up his day's work and decided to stop at a local bar and have a few drinks before heading home. When he was about to step out of his building, he noticed the same car parked outside that had been there when he went to lunch. He quickly returned to his office and pulled out a different coat, hat and a wig that Amman had advised them all to have in case they wanted to leave without being recognized. The safe in his office contained his phony papers, and he grabbed them also, not knowing what he might need. He returned to the lobby and walked out the door. The men in the car didn't give him a second glance.

His heart was hammering as he slid into a dark booth in the bar. He wanted to hear this press conference and think about who those men were. Was Amman having him tailed? None of this was good.

The bar became quiet when the press conference started. Robert almost got violently sick

when he saw Julie sitting there with Frank Powell and a FBI agent. He didn't know who the other man holding her hand was, and at the moment didn't care. His face grew pale as he listened to each one of them talk. Julie's speech had people in the bar muttering about him. How she'd survived and escaped he hadn't a clue, but he would find out and finish her off himself. For now though, he had to get out of town. There was no way he could be arrested.

His car was in a garage several blocks from his town house. He got the car, made a large withdrawal from an ATM machine, and headed out of town as fast as he could.

Brett shook Julie gently awake when they reached the house and helped her inside. Once she was awake, she was full of nervous energy.

"Do you think everything went okay?" she asked Brett, chewing her lip.

"You did great. I expect that the arrests are being made right now. I'll fix us a nightcap and then it's bedtime. We've had a busy last few days and I don't want you relapsing," Brett told her and left for the kitchen. He'd seen a liquor cabinet there and figured it was there for them to use. He poured two snifters of brandy and carried them back to the living room. Julie had lit the fireplace and he sat in a chair facing it and pulled her onto his lap.

"How come I always wind up on your lap?" Julie asked, giggling.

"Because I like you here, and if you're naughty I can just flip you right over and spank it out of you," Brett replied, kissing the side of her neck.

"If it's like that last one, then it's fine," Julie purred back at him and wiggled, exciting a certain part of his anatomy noticeably.

Brett groaned then laughed. "You are one very naughty young lady!" he told her and nipped her ear with his teeth.

Julie giggled and lay back against his chest. She always felt so secure when he held her. The tensions of the day, the brandy and the comfort of his arms soon had her asleep fast.

Brett held her tight and finished his brandy, then picked her up and carried her upstairs. He knew that someone would come around and turn off lights... probably was someone on duty twenty-four hours a day that they never saw.

Abner exploded when he heard the report from the field agents. "What do you mean, Amman and Parson slipped out? I thought you were watching them 24/7!" he bellowed into the phone.

He listed for another minute. "I see, then you better find Parson fast. Amman may have left the country, but Parson better not get out of the city," he ordered.

It was late and he wasn't about to upset Brett and Julie now, but he did call and warn the safe house. He sat pondering what Parson could know and where he would head. His career was gone and there was a warrant out for his arrest, so he shouldn't be able to get far, but Abner wasn't going to rest until the man was in custody.

His next call was to have a crew sent to watch Frank Powell. It was totally possible that Parson would head there. Finally, when he was satisfied everyone was protected, he headed home.

Tom and Betsy had watched the press conference snuggled up on the couch. Betsy's jaw dropped open when she saw Brett sitting there holding Julie Gilbert's hand.

"Tom, do you mean to tell me she was here all along? You knew that and never told me?" she squealed, punching his arm.

Tom rubbed his arm and pulled her close. "Watch it woman, I might retaliate somewhere else," he said.

"Please tell me, how did she wind up here and no one know about it? Did Brett know her before?" she persisted.

"She was stranded in the snow storm... got off the road. Brett rescued her, but she was sick with pneumonia for a week or so. Doc Adams treated her and Mary's been nursing her. She's been confined to Brett's house. Her car's hidden in the station's garage. The FBI has been in on it since about the first day. She was safer here with Brett than anywhere else," he told her.

"But... those men that came here and questioned me, they were after her?"

"Yes, unfortunately they made the mistake of committing an armed robbery while here and were arrested. They were the ones who blew up on the road last weekend. Now, I don't want you talking to anyone about this. If they ask you about Brett, refer them to me. Understand?" Tom tipped her chin up to look him in the eye.

"I won't," Betsy promised.

"It's important to her safety still that you don't. I know a lot of questions are going to be asked, but until we're given the go ahead, we deny knowing what he was doing there."

It was almost ten a.m. before either Julie or Brett woke. The house was quiet and there was no sound of anyone there, but the smell of coffee was irresistible. Brett leaned over and kissed Julie, whispering in her ear, "Time to get up, love!"

Julie awoke and smiled at him. "It feels so good to sleep with no dreams. Do you think they're all behind bars?"

"I'm sure they are. Abner's very efficient. Come on now, shower time," he said, then bounded from bed and pulled her with him.

They were enjoying their second cup of coffee after they'd finished breakfast when they heard the doorbell ring. A few moments later, Abner joined them.

"Morning, how are both of you feeling today?" he asked, pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"I feel great!" Julie replied first.

Brett smiled at her and told Abner, "I guess that's unanimous then. What brings you here?" He had a feeling it was more than to have a cup of coffee and chat.

"I'm going to ask you to stay here for four more days. You can go out as long as you have an agent with you, or close by," Abner told them.

Julie looked puzzled then paled. "Why? You didn't catch them all, did you?" she said in a soft flat voice.

"No, unfortunately Amman slipped by before the press conference even started. Someone must have tipped him off. Parson's left his office disguised and hasn't been back to his apartment either. We have a manhunt on for them both. You'll hear about it on TV, since there's a warrant out for his arrest. I don't know where he is or quite what he'll do, but I'm not taking any chances.

You're very safe here and as long as agents are around you're still safe. Hang in there, it really is almost over," Abner said and patted Julie's hand. "Brett, I'll speak to Silverstein and will call you on your cell later."

Abner left and Brett turned to Julie. "It'll be okay, Julie, his days are numbered now. I want you to be sure and obey me or the agents when they tell us what to do, though," he said.

Julie nodded and picked up her cup again. "What are we going to do today if we can't go home?"

"I can think of several pleasant ways to pass the day, but would you like to get out for awhile? Maybe do some shopping?" Brett asked her.

"I think that would be fun. How do we do that?"

"I'll arrange it with Silverstein," Brett replied. "Now finish up your breakfast, while I find him."

Robert sat in his cheap motel room and watched TV. He'd driven into Virginia the night before in a panic and was now watching his picture all over the news. Fortunately, he still had his disguise on and wouldn't likely be recognized. However, he needed to get out of where he was. The place was seedy and disgusting, far below his standards. He dressed and left, looking for an out of the way place to have breakfast. Finally, he found a diner set off the road, with no TV blaring, ordered breakfast and looked at the road map he'd picked up. Julie obviously was in Washington, but he wanted to see where this Clifton Forge was and figure out where she'd run. The news of the others' arrests unnerved him.

Clifton Forge wasn't hard to find, and Robert decided that he'd find someplace to stay near there, maybe rent a cabin, then he could keep a lookout

for Julie to appear. He just felt that she'd been there and would return; there was too much interest in that little hick town for there to be no reason.

Robert drove to the town east of Clifton Forge and inquired about cabin rentals. The man in the real estate office smiled broadly at him. "We don't get many inquiries at this time of year, but we do have one cabin that's offered on a year round basis. Let me pull the information on it," he said and went to the file cabinet to pull out the brochure. It was perfect for what Robert wanted, isolated in the hills and not far from Clifton Forge.

"That's perfect! If it's available immediately, I'll take it," he told the agent.

"Good, you'll need to fill out this paperwork and I'll need a month's deposit," he said.

Robert didn't blink an eye, but filled out the form with his phony name and handed him a credit card issued in that name also. Fortunately he'd been prepared well.

When he had the keys in his hand and instructions on how to get there, he drove as fast as he could out of town. He wanted to take no chances that anyone could possibly recognize him.

The cabin was smaller than he would have preferred and had few of the amenities he liked, but it would have to do until he figured out how to get out of this mess. He surveyed the cupboards and realized that of course there were no supplies here at all. There were ample pans and things to cook with but no food. First thing he'd need to do was supply himself for at least a week.

Two hours later, he returned to the cabin with groceries and some new clothes. He couldn't keep wearing the suit he'd had on yesterday. He'd also purchased some liquor, so as soon as he made a

drink he sat down and turned on the TV. He was anxious, now that he was safe, to see where they were in the investigation. There had been arrests, his assistant among them, but Amman had apparently fled. Someone had tipped him off, apparently, and it was felt he was no longer in the country.

Robert slammed his fist down on the arm of the chair. "Damn that woman! She caused this; she's ruined my life! I'll get that bitch and make her suffer before I kill her with my own two hands! She won't get away with this!" he screamed into the empty room.

Chapter Twelve

A very irate man sat in the office of IAR Oil Company's President. Ahmen Abbas was not a man to trifle with. He expected his orders to be executed precisely as he gave them. There was no room in his mind for failure. Especially failure that brought shame or derision on him or anything he owned.

"I *cannot* understand how he could have created such a mess. Our reputation and progress with relations in the U.S. have been harmed beyond belief," he said, punctuating each word with a slam of his hand on the desk.

There was stone silence in the room, and the other men standing in front of the desk shook almost visibly.

"What time does his plane land?"

"It will land in one hour, Sir," his secretary answered.

Again there was silence while Ahmen thought. He turned to one of the men and gave his order, "I want him picked up from the plane and taken to the basement. After you have 'played' with him and gotten all information regarding this debacle from him, then you may relieve him of his head. Make sure the head and body are found in a main area."

The man bowed and left the office. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the order would be carried out precisely as Ahmen had ordered. The

man was known for his sadistic and cruel tendencies. All of those answering to him were skilled in torture. Amman would be relieved to die.

"Now, I want the rest of you to start making amends to the United States for this. Do whatever is necessary. Amman's replacement should be in place by next week, with instructions to do whatever is necessary. I shall not suffer for this idiocy," he ordered, and dismissed the men.

Mohammed Amman relaxed in his first class seat, enjoying the fine liquor and food. In his mind he would be able to explain the problem to Ahmen as a failure of the American's. Hopefully Robert Parson and the others were now in jail. He'd watched the news conference on the plane and Julie Gilbert's testimony was devastating. How she'd managed to escape and elude all his men was still a mystery. If he'd been able to have the trained men from home there, she would not be alive today. It was all the inept American's fault.

Twelve hours later, the plane touched down. Amman, refreshed and relaxed, left the plane. He hadn't expected to be met. No one had been informed of his departure as far as he knew, so when two men greeted him, he was surprised.

"How nice of Ahmen to send someone for me. I'll have to be sure and thank him," said Amman, settling himself in the back of the limo. It was only when the door locked, preventing his exit that he began to worry. When the limo entered the corporate grounds and he was yanked from the car and taken to the basement, he was truly alarmed.

Brett and Julie were having a good time shopping in the small historical town in Maryland. They hadn't really known where they were until they got into the town. Of course, they were told not to reveal themselves and to pay with cash. Until they were sure there was no danger, they wanted no sign that Julie or Brett for that matter, were here.

The problem of available cash was solved when Silverstein drew Brett aside and handed him a thousand dollars. "That's a present from some friends. If you need more, let me know."

Brett thanked him but made a note to find out who the 'friends' were. It would be a question for Abner. He didn't intend to take money from someone else. He made sure Julie had her coat buttoned, and they left the house. It was cold today, colder than normal for this time of the year, but it felt good to Julie to get some fresh air. She'd barely been out of the house since all of this started.

They visited several stores and then stopped for lunch. Silverstein and the driver stationed themselves at a table where they could watch them and the door at the same time.

"I wonder how anyone gets used to having a bodyguard shadow you at all times," Julie commented, sipping the wine Brett had ordered.

"They probably don't. I know it's hard, but it's for just a short time and for your safety," Brett told her. Julie sighed and said no more, but she was tired of it.

After lunch, they continued strolling around the town. Brett spotted a jewelry store and steered Julie inside. "Let's look in here for a bit."

As soon as the man asked Brett if he could help him, he asked to see the rings. "I'd like to see solitaire diamonds."

Julie tried several on and fell in love with a round diamond flanked by emeralds. Brett thanked the man and turned to Julie. "Go sit in the car and ask Silverstein to come in."

"Why? I want to stay," Julie retorted. She was so tired of being ordered around.

"Because I said so," Brett said giving her a look that she knew was best for her to obey.

When she was in the car, Silverstein came in. "What's up, did you spot something?" he asked.

"No, I want to use my credit card. Just wanted to let you know ahead of time. By the time the charge shows up, we should be long gone from here," he told him.

Silverstein smiled. "Congratulations! Go ahead."

Julie sat in the car fuming and plotting her revenge. She'd show them she could take care of herself. Finally, he returned and they continued shopping.

"Oh Brett, let me run in here a sec, I want to see something," said Julie.

"Not alone, Julie; you know the rule," Brett told her.

"Well it's silly, you're right here and Silverstein and his beady eyes are, too. Nothing could happen," Julie replied with a stubbornness Brett hadn't heard before.

"I said NO, Julie."

"I'm not a child, Brett, it's perfectly safe. Believe it or not, I did take care of myself for a good number of years." Julie opened the door and stormed inside, Brett right on her heels.

Julie ignored him and browsed through some things then turned to him. "As you can see, there's no one here. Would you please go outside so I can make a purchase without you seeing it? I do like to surprise people, you know?" she tapped her foot.

"We'll discuss this when we get home," Brett said and handed her money.

Julie was thoroughly enjoying herself. She'd actually gotten him to leave. Now she was ready for some fun. She slipped further into the store and noticed the back door. She'd slip out the door and go into the store next door. Then go out and surprise Brett.

Giggling, she slipped through the door and was immediately grabbed and put in the backseat of a car. Julie sat back, horrified as the car sped down the alley.

Brett couldn't see Julie in the store any longer and started to panic. Silverstein came up to him before he could go in to look for her.

"The little idiot tried to get out the back door. I had a car stationed there and they took her and will return her to the house. We need to get back there, fast," he told Brett, rushing him to the car.

"She's got to be terrified," Brett told Silverstein as they sped down the highway.

"I hope she *is* good and scared! That's why I told them to take her back to the house... the back way so she doesn't know where she's going. I'm hoping it'll impress on her the potential danger she could face. I'm going to have a few harsh words with her when she returns," Silverstein told him.

"I'm going to have a few things to say to her, also," Brett commented. "Only my 'discussion'

might have a more lasting affect than yours. I'm sure she'll feel it longer."

Silverstein smiled. He could figure out what that would be. If anyone needed to be spanked, it was Miss Gilbert, after a stunt like that.

"I'm concerned about her. I don't want her terrified to ever go out alone again," Brett said.

"I'll call and check on her," Silverstein said, picking up his cell.

"Hi, how's your passenger?" he asked someone in the other car.

"Quiet, I think, and pretty shook up. She's sniffled a few times but now is just sitting there looking out the window. I think she's trying to figure out where she is. She tried the door at the last stoplight but realized she's locked in. Also tried the panel between us but doesn't realize we can see through it but she can't. Call me when you want her delivered."

Silverstein closed the phone and told Brett what the agent had said. "I don't think it'll harm her permanently, just put some sense into her."

Julie sat in the back seat frozen with fear. She didn't know what to do; the doors were locked and she couldn't get the panel open to see who had her. The scenery out the window was totally unfamiliar to her and she couldn't tell what direction they were going. Tears formed in her eyes and she slumped on the seat, her thoughts in turmoil.

Why, oh why did I have to try and be cute? That was so stupid, but I thought I was safe. Now they'll kill me and I'll never see Brett again!

Every time the car stopped, Julie tried the locks or the windows, but they wouldn't budge.

She didn't think screaming would help; no one would hear her. As they passed other cars, she tried waving wildly but everyone ignored her.

Suddenly she was in familiar territory; they were approaching the street where the safe house was. When the car stopped in front of the house, Julie started crying. She was ushered up the stairs and into the house.

Brett was furious, but his heart melted a bit when he saw Julie standing there with big tears rolling down her face. He pulled her into a tight hug then brushed some of the tears away.

"Shhh, no more crying now, you'll have plenty of time for that later, young lady," he whispered into her ear.

Silverstein dismissed the other men with thanks, and turned to Julie.

"You were stupid, pulling a stunt like that. What did you expect to gain? You are never to disobey an order again, or I'll make sure you're taken into protective custody and placed in a cell. Do you understand me?" he yelled at her, his face flushed red.

Julie sat there with her head down and tears still coming down her cheeks. She looked up when he stopped, and told him, "I'm sorry. It was stupid and it won't be necessary to lock me up. I won't do anything like that again."

Silverstein muttered something and left the room. Brett sat there looking at Julie and she at him.

"Go upstairs Julie. I'll join you in a minute," Brett told her in a quiet voice.

"I'm sorry Brett, please don't punish me!" Julie begged.

"Go upstairs, *now*, Julie!" Brett responded and stood up. Julie still sat looking at him. She was

just about to say something else, when Brett pulled her off the couch, swatted her once and motioned toward the stairs.

"Upstairs, and I'll be up!" he said.

Julie ran up the stairs, dreading what she knew was going to happen. She threw herself on the bed and let loose the sobs she'd been holding in. When Brett entered the room, she was still sobbing.

Even though his heart was melting at the sight of her, he went to get her hairbrush and sat down on the bed next to her, pulling her into his arms.

"Julie, you have no idea how scared I was when I didn't see you in the store anymore. I would've been after you in a flash, except that Silverstein told me that his men had you. Do you realize what could've happened to you?" he asked, hugging her tightly.

"I do, I was so scared. I thought I was going to be killed and I'd never see you again," Julie sobbed into his chest.

"I know. That's why I'm going to light a fire on that butt of yours so you'll remember never to act this stupidly again. You *will* learn to obey, Julie. I only give orders for your own safety," Brett said, then stood her on her feet, unzipped her jeans and pulled them with her panties to her knees.

Julie was still crying when he lowered her over his lap and started smacking her with his hand. He was lighting a fire like she'd never felt before, each smack igniting new fires. When she felt she couldn't stand anymore, he picked up the brush and hit first one cheek then the other with hard, stinging slaps.

Julie gasped at the feel of the brush and pleaded with him, "Brett, please... I'm sorry... it hurts... oh please, please stop!"

Brett didn't respond but pushed her over further and concentrated six hard slaps of the brush on her upper thighs, then dropped it on the bed and rubbed his hand over her burning bottom.

Gently, he picked her up, put her on his lap and held her tight while she cried into his chest.

When she calmed, she looked up at him and noticed the tears in his eyes. "Brett, I'm so sorry! I'll never disobey you again."

Brett wiped her tears away with his thumb and kissed her deeply. "I love you, Julie! You scared me so much. I'm sorry they scared you, but it was to teach you a lesson."

"I know and I was terrified, I really was," she said softly into his shoulder and yawned.

Brett pulled the blankets down on the bed, laid her on her tummy and covered her.

"Take a nap, I'll be back to get you for dinner," he said and rubbed her back. She was sleeping before he left the room.

Abner frowned as he listened to the report from Silverstein. "I didn't think Julie would do something like that. Don't worry about it, I'm sure Brett will make sure she never pulls a stunt like that again. Ask him to give me a call," said Abner and hung up.

Brett was sitting on the couch reading when Silverstein joined him. "I talked to Jones; he wants you to call him. Your cell phone is safe in here, the signal gets jumbled."

He waited for a minute then dialed Abner. "I guess you heard about our afternoon?" asked Brett.

"Yes, what got into her?"

"I think she was feeling safe and some of her old willfulness was coming back. Trust me, she won't be trying that again anytime soon. The ride home

alone not knowing where she was going or who had her scared her plenty and I made sure she'd remember it for a while, too," Brett told him.

"Good, because we still haven't located Parson or even have a clue where he is. His car's gone and a large withdrawal from his account, but no credit card transactions. I have a crew going over his office and apartment, but it might take us a day or so to see if there's anything there. I'm sending an alert out to all the police stations in Maryland, Virginia and Pennsylvania," he told Brett.

"Any word on Amman? I think he might be more dangerous than Parson."

"We know he boarded a flight using phony credentials. The ticket clerk verified a picture of him. He'd added a mustache, but she still I.D.'d him. If he's back home in his country, we're powerless, but he won't be able to come back here."

Brett hung up and decided to call Tom to warn him. "Tom, this is Brett. How are things going?"

"Quiet, agents still around and at your place, but no other strangers besides a passing motorist or two. What's going on there?" asked Tom.

"We're staying here for a few days. Parson and Amman eluded arrest. Amman is out of the country, but there's no clue where Parson is. They want to try and locate him before we leave. I want you to keep an eye out for him; you should be getting a bulletin from the FBI with his picture. Keep in mind he could grow a beard or dye his hair, add glasses, etc. Question anyone around who meets that description. I'll be back in touch tomorrow," Brett told him and hung up.

Julie woke up from her nap to see Brett moving across the room toward her. He sat down on the

bed and ruffled her hair. "Feeling better now? It's time to get ready for dinner. I ran a tub for you, so up and at it."

Julie stretched in bed and really wanted just to stay there, but the next thing she knew, Brett had her in his arms, carrying her to the bathroom. He stood her on her feet, slowly undressed her, then placed her in the tub and started washing her. It was the most sensual bath she'd ever had. Every nerve in her body was on alert, waiting for him to touch the right spots, which he did quite regularly.

"Brett, you're going to drive me insane," she moaned.

"I hope not, I love you too much to have to put you in an asylum," he laughed. She moaned again as his hand dipped between her legs. Finally, he undressed himself and joined her in the tub. It wasn't long before he was as ready for loving as she was and slowly slid into her, driving both of them over the edge.

Later as they dressed, Julie giggled. "I think I could take a bath like that every day."

Brett smiled. "Me too, but I think we'll save them for special occasions."

After dinner when they were cuddled together on the couch watching TV, Julie asked Brett in a soft voice, "Do you think they'll catch Robert soon?"

"I hope so. Right now they don't have any idea where he is. I just wish I knew how close Amman was getting to you and how much he told him. I told Tom to keep a sharp eye out. Abner has left the agents in place at home until we return."

Julie sighed and snuggled in closer to his warmth. Brett smiled down at her, so glad that she was safe with him and nothing really had happened that afternoon.

The man and his wife were out for an evening stroll in the twilight of the evening. This was normally a quiet time in the town and most others were home for the evening. It was their preferred time to stroll the ancient cobblestone streets.

The route they were taking this evening led them past some of the oldest building in town and was particularly winding, just wide enough for a cart to pass through. The shadows were lengthening and it was dark, but still not dark enough to miss a lump in the middle of the road. The man leaned down to look and pulled a bag off. His wife screamed and clung to him, and he jumped back in horror. In seconds people were standing around looking at the headless mutilated body with his head between his legs, a male organ protruding from his mouth, the eyes still open reflecting terror even though dead.

Ahmen Abbas listened to the men report their findings and accomplishments since their last meeting. The last to report was the one who had 'disposed of the problem' that had plagued their leader.

"I see, and I expect that we will have the police here momentarily, then?" asked Abbas.

"I expect so, sir, I saw his remains discovered and the police arrive. I made sure his identification was on him. It will appear to be a retaliatory attack by rivals for selling them out," he said.

He turned to his press secretary. "You will make sure to tell them that we were appalled to learn that he was wanted by the U.S. FBI and that we have just learned he was selling information on us to our rivals. That should cover things nicely. You are

dismissed. Well done," he said, waving them from his office. Now he could relax a bit and enjoy a few wonderful hours with several of his mistresses. Life was indeed good.

Robert felt rested and better than he had the day before. He was in an isolated location under a phony name and no one would or could find him. Life wasn't good, but suddenly it was better. He would have the time to make plans. Killing Julie and maybe that man with her was certainly primary.

First on his agenda for the morning was surveying Clifton Forge up close. Prying information from people was his specialty, so he'd see what he could learn about Julie.

Today he took more time surveying his surroundings. The view of the ranch he saw when he crested the hill made him stop to look. There was a woman parking her car and entering through a back entrance. She appeared to wear a uniform of some sort; it must be a successful ranch to have hired help. There were a few horses running in the pasture and they appeared to be thoroughbreds. He just might have to pay a visit to this neighbor and check it out more closely.

The town was quiet and there really wasn't much going on. Robert rode through it and then decided to stop at a diner on the edge of town for lunch. His heart skipped a beat when he saw two of the local cops from the Sheriff's office sitting in a booth. Forcing himself to remain calm, he took the booth behind them and kept his ears open.

Tom saw the stranger the minute he entered the diner. "Don't be obvious, but a stranger just came in and it seems to me that he's looking for

something more than a meal. Watch what you say," he told the young officer sitting across from him.

When Robert passed by and Tom got a good look at him, something about him pricked at the back of his brain, but he couldn't figure out what it was. Their lunch was served and Alice, the waitress flirted a bit with the younger man, then asked Tom, "So when is Brett coming back?"

"He should be back on Monday. He's enjoying his Florida vacation, and said maybe he'll just stay there, but you know he'll be back." Tom winked at her and she laughed and walked away.

Robert took his time ordering, but gleaned nothing from the conversation between the two cops. Maybe he was wrong about this place.

Tom paid the bill and told Alice. "Don't answer any questions about Brett. I'm not sure about that stranger."

"Sure thing, but you know I saw him on TV the other night. Most of the town did, so what's he doing in Florida and what was he doing there?" Alice asked.

"It was some official business for the FBI, that's all I know," Tom said and waved goodbye.

Robert waited until Alice came back with his check and asked her, "So was that the Sheriff they were talking about? I thought I'd pay him a visit to find out about this area, but if he's on vacation, guess I'll have to wait."

"Guess he's in Florida, should be back Monday," she told him.

Robert paid his bill and left. He'd ride around a bit further out of town; maybe ask some questions there.

"We just got some interesting news across the wire," Abner's assistant said handing him the printed report.

BODY OF PROMINENT LOBBYIST FOUND IN ALLEY

The body of Mohammed Amman was found this evening in an alley by a couple walking. Even though it was mutilated it has been positively identified.

He fled Washington DC a day ago, wanted by the FBI in the current oil scandal and murder of Victor Gilberts. Sources say he was apparently tortured before being mutilated and beheaded.

We are waiting for an official announcement from IAR Oil Company, his employer.

Abner whistled. "I guess we know what happened to him. I guess his employer wasn't impressed with his performance. Let the rest of the team know. I hope this gets out to the press here fast. Might spook Parsons into revealing himself."

Robert was relaxing with his drink in front of the TV watching the news. He was still being hunted, but he expected no less. So far he was safe; his disguise was working. The press should give up on him soon.

He was in the kitchen when the news bulletin had him running back to the set. It was unbelievable. The shock had him sinking back in his

chair. Amman had always told them how valued he was by his company. How could this have happened? It appeared according to the news that a rival company had murdered him, but somehow Robert doubted it. The mutilation seemed to imply he was a traitor.

Fear snaked through his belly like a large cold snake. If that had happened to Amman, who might also be looking for him? Sweat broke out on his forehead and he ran to the bathroom, losing the contents of his stomach.

Brett sat down at the table with his coffee and opened the paper. Julie was still dressing and he left her to get coffee. The headline screamed at him.

LOBBYIST FOUND MUTILATED AND MURDERED

The head Lobbyist for IAR Oil Company in the US, was found murdered on the streets of his home town last evening. The FBI had issued a warrant for his arrest as a person of interest in the murder of Vincent Gilbert. He was rumored to be heavily involved in the kickback scandal that has resulted in the arrest of several members of Congress and their staff. The most prominent member of this probe, Robert Parson, also fled and is now considered a fugitive from the law.

Amman was apparently tortured and then mutilated in the traditional manner for those considered traitors to a cause. He was beheaded and left in a side street.

Spokesmen for IAR Oil Company have said that they are saddened by the events, but they believe that Amman was selling secrets from their company to rivals.

Officials at the FBI have declined comment beyond stating their investigation into Mohammed Amman is now closed.

Julie walked into the kitchen as he finished reading the story and saw the picture accompanying it.

"I know him. He used to be at all of Robert's parties. What happened to him?" she asked.

"You better get a cup of coffee before I tell you," Brett answered her.

Julie was shocked after reading the account. "Wow, it seems he must have really been involved in a lot of shady dealings."

Brett hesitated a moment before answering her, "I think he is, well was, a very dangerous man. If Robert was associated with him, it was extremely dangerous men we were dealing with. We'll wait and see what Abner has to say, but this may take away some of the danger."

Tom examined the APB from the FBI and the accompanying pictures. He knew he'd never met

Parson, but there was something very familiar about him. It was like he'd seen him recently, but nothing clicked. He called the other men into the office and had them all look at the picture.

"This man's wanted by the FBI in regards to the murder of Vincent Gilbert. They have reason to believe he may have headed in this direction. I talked to Brett yesterday and he asked that you all keep the picture with you. The man will most likely be disguised in some manner, different color hair, glasses, mustache, beard, something like that," he told them, handing them each a picture. "If you see him, or anyone resembling him, call in at once and detain the person for questioning."

"Tom, this man looks like that stranger in the diner yesterday. There was a car matching this description in the parking lot when we left, too," a young officer said.

Tom looked at the picture again. "You're right, it does look a bit like him. Okay, watch out for the car as well. If you see it, pull it over."

When they'd left, Tom placed a call to Brett. "I think we may have a sighting of him in the area," he related what happened the day before.

"Good work, it might be he was just passing through. Talk to Alice and see if he said anything to her," Brett told him. "Call me back and let me know."

Brett immediately dialed Abner. This was not good news. How he could have traced Julie, he had no idea.

Chapter Thirteen

Abner listened carefully to what Brett told him. "Okay, I'm going to have the highway patrol keep an eye out for his car. If he's out driving around in that area, we'll find him. Just stay put for a few more days," he told Brett.

Julie was in the other room and Brett joined her. "I guess we're here for a few more days. I don't think we should go out today, so we'll have to amuse ourselves here."

"Okay, I have books I can read, so I guess that's what I'll do. This is sort of boring though. Can't we even go for a walk?" she asked.

"I think we can manage that, but we can't go alone," Brett replied.

Julie sighed deeply. "I'll make the best of it, I promise."

Robert sat at his table and tried to think of a plan. If they'd eliminated Amman, it was possible they'd be after him, too. So he faced a double threat. The FBI at least didn't mean to torture and kill him, but he preferred his freedom too much to give up. Plus he had Julie to take care of.

The noon news wasn't any more encouraging. One of the newscasters broadcasted the APB from the FBI with a description of his car and license plate. He'd have to do something about that fast.

A different car was needed. He grabbed his keys and headed out, making sure to keep to the back roads. Finally, he hit a small town tucked away in the hills with a small car lot. It was only a matter of fifteen minutes before he was driving away in a different car. The salesman seemed only too happy to evenly trade him a used Chevy for his new Mercedes. Since the town was so far off the main road, he doubted anyone would ever check on it. Even if they did, they wouldn't know where he was.

Free to roam again, he skirted the area around Clifton Forge and found a back road that eventually led him to the ranch he'd spied the day before. There was the same car parked in the driveway, but he didn't want to get too close. Other than the car, there was no sign of activity. It was possible that the occupants worked, or were away.

His next step was the library in the next town. Hopefully they'd have computers with Internet access available. Information on Clifton Forge would be very helpful. Also, a list of the residents to see if there were any names that might ring a bell with him.

Tom sat down at the counter in the diner and ordered a cup of coffee. There were only a handful of customers mid-morning, so Alice wasn't busy.

"Can you take a break?" Tom asked her. "I'd like to talk to you."

"Sure, nothing much going on," she answered, then poured herself a cup of coffee and joined him.

Tom showed her the picture of Parson. "Does this man look familiar to you?"

Alice was good with faces and remembering people; it helped in her business. "If you add a mustache and some glasses... hmmm... it looks

like that man that was in yesterday. The one you said to not answer any questions about Brett," she told him.

"Did he ask anything about Brett?" Tom's heart was starting to beat harder.

"Yeah, said something about wanting to talk to Brett, get some information on the area. I just told him he'd be back Monday and let it go. He didn't ask any more, just left," she said.

"Thanks Alice. If he should come in again, don't alarm him, but call the office immediately and tell them Robert Parson is here."

"What? That man is Robert Parson?" Alice gasped.

"I think so. This is his pic from the FBI. We thought it looked like that guy from yesterday but wanted to be sure. Don't worry, he might be on his way somewhere else," Tom told her and patted her hand. "Back to work for me, see you later."

On the way back to the office, Tom decided it might be a good idea to circulate the notice to all the businesses in town. If Parson were in the area, he'd need to shop or get gas at some point in time.

Brett wasn't happy to hear that Alice identified Parson. "I like your idea of posting the bulletin. I hope he isn't around there anymore... would like to think he was passing through, though why he wanted to see me, I have no idea," Brett said.

"I thought maybe he was going to ask about Julie like the others. Try and find out if you'd seen her. After all, he has no clue who you are," Tom replied.

"Thanks Tom, I'll let Abner know."

"I'll alert the agents there and have them start watching too. Perhaps wouldn't be a bad idea to have one in the diner for a while. I'll keep in touch," Abner told him and hung up.

The new Mercedes was causing quite a lot of attention in the small town. It was rare that anyone had a new car, let alone a fancy foreign one. The owner of the lot was happier than he'd been in a long time. First he did the swap with the stranger, who said he was in the middle of a divorce and didn't want his wife to wind up with the car, and now he had the Mayor wanting to buy it. He was probably about the only man in town who could afford it.

The Mayor was getting along in years, and wanted the car to take his wife on a nice trip or two. In fact this weekend, they would go visit relatives in Winchester, Kentucky. His wife had wanted to visit for a long time, now they could go in style.

"I'll apply for new plates for ya, but I think you can just use these for this weekend," the salesman assured him.

The Mayor left, happy to tell his wife to start packing. They were leaving first thing in the morning.

Robert ate lunch in his cabin and then headed to the library. For now he was avoiding Clifton Forge. He wanted to check out some things first.

The library was empty so he had unlimited use of the computer with Internet access. There was a lot of information on Clifton Forge. The history of it, when it was founded, how it was named, but he didn't care about that. He wanted recent census information.

It took a bit of searching but he finally located what he wanted. There were no Gilberts listed as

living there now. He searched back and for the last fifty years; there was no mention of a Gilbert.

He started over with the recent census and read the names. Again there was no name he remembered Julie ever mentioning. He was ready to give up when he spotted a site that offered the local paper online. When he read through a few issues, he stopped on one page and stared at it. The man, who was smiling at him, was Brett Rowan, Sheriff of Clifton Forge, the same man who was sitting holding Julie's hand at the press conference. He had just hit the Mother Lode.

Now he just had to find out where Sheriff Rowan lived. That would most likely be where he'd find Julie, or at least information on where she was.

The people finder provided all he needed to know. When he saw the address, he smiled evilly.

Well ... well ... well, it seems the ranch he'd been admiring belonged to the Sheriff; a perfect place to hide Julie.

Robert packed up his notes and left. Now he needed to watch and wait for them to return. Or at least the Sheriff, then move in and find out where Julie was. If the Sheriff had to die in the process, so be it. For now, he'd buy some binoculars and keep a close eye on the place and lay low. He was sure now that others in Clifton Forge would be watching for him. His laugh was maniacal as he thought of what he would do to Julie before he killed her. Amman may have gotten off easy compared to his thoughts for Julie.

He found a hardware store that carried exactly what he needed. He bought his binoculars along with rope, a gas can and most important of all a gun. Thankfully, these counties hadn't instituted any gun laws. Robert returned to his cabin happy.

Julie was busy on the computer and Brett left her to make some special requests for that evening. It wasn't quite how he pictured doing this, but he was making it as special as he could. The housekeeper smiled at his requests; they would be handled. Silverstein was more than happy to run the one errand Brett needed.

When it was almost time for dinner, Brett suggested they dress for that evening.

"Why?" Julie asked.

"Because I thought it would be nice for a change, break up the evening," he told her and kissed her.

Brett was impressed when they came down for dinner. A cozy fire was lit and the table was set with candles and flowers. Wine was chilling in the cooler.

"Wow, this is great!" Julie exclaimed when she saw the dining room.

The dinner was marvelous and the prime rib, one of Julie's favorites, had her smiling all through dinner. When the table was cleared and dessert about to be served, Brett took Julie's hand and placed the diamond he selected on it.

"This makes it official. I'm so happy and love you so much, Julie. I want a lifetime of being with you," he said.

Julie teared up but smiled back at him. "I love you too, Brett, and I'm so glad I found you!"

Brett poured champagne and once they finished the chocolate mousse, they retired to the living room and the fireplace. Brett held her tight against him and slowly kissed her neck. Julie moaned and turned to catch his lips in a smoldering kiss. It wasn't long before they were both entwined on the

rug in front of the fireplace celebrating their love for each other.

After their heart rates had returned to normal and they relaxed a bit in each other's arms, Brett got robes for them and grabbed another bottle of champagne. They cuddled on the couch and talked about their future.

"When we get the okay from Abner to leave, I think we should go to Richmond and clean out your apartment. I don't want you away from me for even a day," Brett told her.

"I really don't have too much, but I have Dad's house to think about, too. Frank's handling a lot, but I still have decisions to make there. Maybe we could stop there and just see what needs to be done. I also have to think about a job. Right now, I don't know what I want to do," Julie said and leaned into Brett.

"You really wouldn't have to work, but I'm sure you could freelance easily enough from the ranch. We could even add an office wing on for you."

"I was thinking of trying something a bit different; perhaps playing around with catering a bit. I've always loved to cook and maybe there's a need for it there. There aren't a lot of fancy restaurants and sometimes people just want a special dinner," Julie told him.

"Sounds fine to me. I think we have lots of time to do it, but first we have to get all the other things settled," Brett replied, then added, "and we have a wedding to plan."

Julie smiled at the mention of the wedding. "I have some ideas on that, but I need to really think them through a bit before we talk about it. I want it special for both of us."

They talked into the early hours of the morning and celebrated again with the special spanking Julie

had come to love. It was almost dawn before they slept.

The Mayor and his wife had enjoyed their trip in the new Mercedes; it drove better than any car either of them ever owned before. Their relatives were all impressed with the car and he'd given many rides in it all weekend. They said goodbye to their family, promising another trip in the near future, and started the trip home. They had just gotten on the interstate on the outskirts of Winchester when a state trooper roared up behind him with lights flashing.

"Wonder who he's after," the Mayor commented to his wife, pulling over to let the car pass.

"He's pulling up behind us," his wife said nervously.

The Mayor was shocked when within the next minute, four more squads pulled up and police were out with guns drawn, pointing at him and the car.

"Get out of the car and keep your hands up," they were instructed.

He and his wife complied shakily; completely clueless as to why they were being arrested.

"You must have made a mistake, I haven't done anything!" he told them with a hitch in his voice.

"Keep your hands up and move away from the car," they were instructed and did as they were told.

Once they were clear of the car, others moved in to check the car and trunk. After some whispered reports, a trooper who appeared to be in charge came over to them.

"There is a interstate APB on this car. We're going to take you into the station for questioning,"

he told them and ushered them both into the back seat of the squad car.

The Mayor was shaken and his wife was crying. "What do you think we've done? I just bought this car on Thursday."

"We'll explain it all at the station."

After several hours of questioning, they were allowed to leave, but not with the car. The report contained the name of the dealer who sold him the car, and that information was relayed to the FBI.

The captain offered to drive them to a rental lot so they could obtain transportation home. Their luggage and belongings had been removed from the car, and transferred to the rental.

"I'm sorry this happened to you, but we can't take chances on this case. I hope the man who ditched this is long out of your area. Thanks for your cooperation and understanding," the Captain told him.

It was an irate Mayor who drove home. "Just wait till that dealer opens. I'll have all my money back and him closed down, if the FBI hasn't already done it," he consoled his upset wife.

Abner smiled when he read the report on the recovery of Parson's car. He turned to the special group in charge of locating him and said, "I bet that's one ticked off Mayor. I'd like to see that car dealer's face when he finds out he's out the money."

"The State boys are taking care of some fines against him, but he'll have to refund the money he made on the Mercedes. We got a good description of the car Parson traded for, and the temp license plate number on it. I doubt he'll get permanent

ones, may steal some or just keep ditching cars as he moves," the agent reported.

"Give me an update," Abner said, then sat back and listened to all of them.

"So we know he was seen in Clifton Forge and asked to see the sheriff, but hasn't been seen by anyone else in the area since. There are posters in all the stores in Clifton Forge and surrounding areas. Anything else?" Abner asked them.

"No, I think he's probably fled the state totally. Got the new car and took off. He could be anywhere at this time. We'll have to rely on the state guys to keep their eyes and ears open. Eventually we'll nab him. His credit card is monitored and we're still going over all the records in his home and office as well as Amman and the others involved."

"I want the group in Clifton Forge to stay put for a couple of weeks. I'm going to let Julie and Brett return. We can't keep them here forever, and he does have a job to do. Just tell the guys to stay on their toes and watch," Abner told the group, dismissing them.

Brett was trying to figure out a way to keep Julie amused. It was now Monday morning and she was getting more and more restless everyday. They'd taken some walks and drives, but the waiting was getting to her. Actually it was getting to him also. Tom had reported that there were no new sightings and everyone was aware and watching.

"Have you heard anything?" Julie asked, rubbing her neck as she came into the kitchen.

"No, I'll call Abner later if I don't," Brett told her, pulling her down on his lap and massaging her neck.

"Anything you want to do today?" he asked.

"I don't know. I'm so bored and can't think of a thing; I just want to be able to go into a restaurant and eat, without having guards all around and being on edge.

Before Brett could answer her, his phone rang.

"Hi Abner, any word?" he asked him.

Julie leaned into his chest trying to hear.

"We're going to let you go home," Abner told him. "I'll let Silverstein know and he can arrange transport. You can go today if you want," Abner told him. "I do want to keep some men around Clifton Forge for a while, though. Just to keep an eye on things."

"That's great, but we aren't going to need transport home. I'm going to get Julie a van and we'll use that to clean out her apartment and settle up there, then take a short trip to her Dad's place. We need to see what needs doing there," Brett replied.

"Sounds great, just let Silverstein know what he can do to help. Thanks for your patience and thank Julie for me. What she did was really brave and we've settled this faster than we ever would have without her help," Abner said and hung up.

"We're sprung!" Brett told Julie and hugged her tight. "Want to get going today?"

"YES! What's this about a new car? I have a car, Brett," she said looking puzzled.

"I know you do, but for winter driving around the ranch, it isn't good. We'll keep it if you want, but only for good weather driving," he told her.

"I think I should at least have been consulted about that, and not just told what I can and can't drive," she said and huffed out of the kitchen.

Brett shook his head and went after her, catching her before she went upstairs.

"You'll have a say on many things, but when it comes to your safety, I'm the law! Understand?" he asked tilting her chin up so she looked in his eyes.

"No, I don't want a new car!" Julie said and ran up the stairs.

Brett let her go and went to talk to Silverstein, arranging for their departure. They'd be driven to a car dealer that Silverstein guaranteed could get them immediate delivery. When everything was settled, Brett went upstairs to find Julie.

He found her sitting on the bed pouting, with her hands folded over her chest.

"Do you want a spanking?" he said, softly closing the door.

"NO!" Julie shouted at him. "Just leave me alone. I don't want a new car. My dad gave me that car, and I want it!"

Brett sighed and sat down next to her and wrapped his arms around her. "I'm not saying you have to get rid of the car, Julie. I said you aren't going to drive it in the winter, and you're not. I understand how you feel, but I'm not going to allow you to drive something that isn't safe for the conditions where we live."

Julie shook her head no. "I don't like to be bossed around," she finally said.

"I know that. But you know what? I'll boss you around anytime I think it's necessary and this is one of them. We have someone waiting to take us shopping. I'll postpone it long enough to spank you and then we'll go, or you can drop the attitude and go now. What's it going to be?" Brett asked her.

Julie sat mutely until Brett started to unsnap her jeans.

"Okay, I'll go, but I get to pick out the color and all the stuff in it," she said.

"Deal. C'mon let's go," Brett kissed her and pulled her up.

Robert found that he could walk along the hill behind his cabin, especially since the snow had melted a lot, and see the ranch and road leading to it. With his binoculars, he surveyed it several times a day. So far there'd been no change in the pattern of traffic at the house. The housekeeper, or whoever she was, came every morning and a man came everyday to tend to the horses. At night there were lights but he'd taken the time to watch one night and knew they were on timers. Nope, Sheriff Brett Rowan hadn't returned, and here it was Monday. So much for the lies the deputy had spread about. Now that he, Robert, knew the truth, it was easier to wait. As of right now, he had all the time in the world. Julie had seen to that, and she was going to find out shortly how little she had left.

The newscast made him smile. He could just imagine that stupid hick Mayor being arrested in his old car. That move had bought him some time, but not a lot as they'd have the description of this one now. It didn't matter; he wouldn't need it much longer. As soon as he'd taken care of Julie and probably her sheriff, he'd dump it and get something else.

Julie loved her new SUV. It took a bit to get used to driving it, but she felt special driving the Lexus. Brett insisted it wasn't too much money and he approved of the safety of it. It was such a pretty silvery color too, far more subdued than her red car, but she didn't want them both the same color.

An hour into shopping she'd dropped the pout completely and really enjoyed it.

Now Brett was driving, and they were headed down the street where her apartment was. It seemed like a year since she'd left. The day was warm, so only a light jacket was needed.

"This is nice, Julie, you did a good job decorating it," Brett said as he helped her pack boxes.

"Thanks, I didn't have much, but I picked only stuff I liked," Julie said, looking around. "The landlord was very nice about the lease. I figured I'd have more trouble. The notoriety helped, I guess," she commented.

"The governor's backing didn't hurt either. He's a very nice man. I enjoyed meeting him."

It took them longer than they'd planned to pack up, but by seven p.m. they were pulling in the drive at Vincent Gilbert's home. The caretaker was expecting them and they received an additional surprise when Frank opened the door.

Chapter Fourteen

Julie hugged Frank tight. "I didn't know you were going to be here," she said, hugging him once again.

"I thought I'd surprise you and join you for dinner. Then we can go over some things briefly before you head home tomorrow," he told her before shaking Brett's hand.

The dinner was simple and they retired to Vincent's office after dinner to review papers.

Julie pored over some of them, asking questions every once in a while before passing them on to Brett to read. His background in law made it easier for him to understand some of the legal terms he was reading.

"Basically Julie, you own this property and everything in or on it, besides the rest of the estate not bequeathed to others," Frank told her.

"I can hardly get my mind around it," she replied. "I want to make sure the staff here have places to stay and are taken care of."

"Vincent took care of that in his bequests to them. All have ample provisions for a secure retirement and a bit extra. They're already making plans to leave as soon as you let them know what you want done with the contents of the house. Margaret, the housekeeper, is joining my staff. My present housekeeper's retiring and joining her daughter's family in Florida, so it worked out fine. She'll be here for as long as you need her, though."

Frank said goodnight and Julie took Brett's hand to gave him a tour of the house. It was a huge old house and had a lot of antiques and mementoes that had been in the family for years.

"I just don't know what to do with it all, Brett," Julie said with a hitch in her voice.

"Let's get some sleep and tomorrow morning, I'll arrange to have each room photographed and catalogued. It'll be easier going over it at home, with a few trips up here to verify. Whatever you want to keep, somehow we'll figure it out. Maybe we'll need to build a new house for it. But it'll all work out," he told her and scooped her up.

"Now, it's bedtime, before those circles under your eyes multiply," he said, kissing her on each eye.

Brett woke early and crept out of bed to let Julie sleep a bit longer. He knew she was exhausted and needed more sleep. He walked slowly through the house, admiring the good taste of the owners who had decorated over the years. One room in particular had his heart melting. It was at the end of the second floor hall and he saw immediately that it was the nursery. This was where Julie was raised and probably her father and his father before him.

It was currently done in soft yellows with white pique crib skirt and curtains. Toys that he supposed had once been Julie's were still on shelves and a doll and teddy bear tucked in the crib. He had been standing there imagining Julie bent over the crib, picking up a child of their own, when he felt her arms slide around his waist.

"Pretty room, isn't it?" she said softly against his back.

"Yeah. Makes me want to see it used. I think we need this room saved and sent to Clifton Forge," he replied his voice thick with emotion.

Julie hugged him tight, emotion filling her as well. "I think we can handle that."

They walked hand in hand back to the room they shared and lay back in bed discussing their dreams.

When they finally got up, Brett called Tom. "Hi, it's going to be another day before we get back. I want to help get some things settled here for Julie. We'll leave early tomorrow morning. Should be home by early afternoon. Anything happening?" he asked.

"No, it's quiet. We still have the Feds around, as I'm sure you know, but none at your place now. Do you want me to tell Mary to get anything special for you?"

"I'll call her, but I just had a thought, why don't you and Betsy come for dinner. We have a lot to catch up on, and I think Julie and Betsy would hit it off. Give her a break from all of this. Say seven o'clock?"

"Great, we'll see you at seven," Tom said and hung up to call Betsy.

"You get to meet Julie tomorrow. Brett just invited us to dinner," Tom told her.

"What? They're home?" Betsy said, and continued, "you didn't tell me."

"No... home tomorrow. Have a few more things to finish up. He invited us, feels Julie needs some female companionship."

"Good, poor thing I'm sure she does. I'll get some wine and flowers to take. Maybe call Mary. See you later," Betsy said and hung up. She was dying to tell some of her friends, but knew she couldn't... not yet, anyway.

Robert checked periodically all day Tuesday and once again there was no sign of Brett or Julie. He couldn't imagine they were still away; after all, the sheriff had a town to look after. It wasn't worth the chance to take a trip into Clifton Forge or to call, so he did the next best thing... visited the library again.

This time he made sure he found a current listing of homeowners in the area. Perhaps he'd sold the ranch and different people lived there. Unfortunately, he ran up against a brick wall. Brett wasn't listed, nor was the owner of the property the ranch was on. Now he wasn't sure at all he had the right place. Could that have been a fluke? Perhaps Julie knew him from somewhere else and had never been in Clifton Forge. But then why did Amman and the FBI seem to focus on it so much. Something wasn't right at all. He really wished he could make some phone calls to his old contacts, but under the circumstances now, that was impossible. Angry at his lack of answers, he slammed the book down, earning him a glare from a librarian, and stormed out of the library.

Once he was home, he decided that he'd give it another day, and if nothing happened he'd have to move on. There was no way he could stay in this area for much longer. In fact, he needed to get out of the country as fast as possible. Canada was closer, but Mexico was safer. He'd head there and swap cars as often as he could. Boredom was setting in, he needed to get things done and move on.

Tuesday was a busy day for Julie and Brett. An estate service had been hired to photograph every room in meticulous detail and catalog all the

contents of the house, with the understanding that they would handle the sale of any items not moved to Clifton Forge. They both were exhausted by the end of the day and ended the day early.

"It's too early to go to bed," Julie complained at ten o'clock when Brett announced they needed sleep.

"Not when we have to be up early tomorrow and have a long drive home. Bedtime it is," he declared.

Julie wasn't happy about it, but didn't fight him. She was asleep two minutes after they were in bed and he'd kissed her goodnight. Brett fell asleep chuckling.

By nine a.m. the car was loaded with a few additional items from the house and they were on the way home. Julie enjoyed the ride and really seeing the scenery for the first time. Both of her other trips, she was far too nervous and upset to appreciate the beauty of the countryside.

At noon they stopped for lunch, and Julie smiled happily. "It's so nice to not have to look over your shoulder, and just be able to stop anywhere, with no guards," she said. "I forgot how nice it is."

Brett squeezed her hand. "I'm glad, too, but we still need to be a bit cautious and aware until they arrest Robert. So don't let your guard down totally," he told her. Julie nodded and smiled back at him. Lunch arrived and that ended the conversation.

Mary was waiting for them when they arrived home and hugged both of them tight. "I'm so glad to see you home. The whole town is buzzing about Brett being on TV. You're going to be pestered with questions all day tomorrow."

"I'm sure I will. Wait till they hear that Julie was here and is now going to be my wife," Brett told her and picked up Julie's hand, showing her the ring.

Mary smiled. "That will keep the gossip mill going for two months. I got everything you wanted and it's in the refrigerator. If you need help I'll stay," she told them.

"No, it's fine, I'll manage," Julie told her.

"Good, then I'll see you in the morning," Mary said and left.

When she was gone, Brett went to check the horses and Julie started preparations for dinner. She really was nervous about meeting Tom and Betsy, but was glad she was finally getting a chance to meet the residents. She was making a simple Chicken Cacciatore so preparations were easy.

When Brett returned he found her on the couch, with a book in her lap but napping. Gently he took the book and picked her up and carried her to the bedroom. They had plenty of time for a nap.

Julie woke a bit later and smiled at Brett. They still had an hour and she had a wonderful idea of how to spend it.

It was almost seven p.m. and Julie was very nervous. It wasn't like she'd never met new people before, but somehow this seemed special.

"Does the table look okay?" Julie asked Brett for the third time.

"Yes, everything's perfect. The smell from the kitchen's wonderful. You didn't need to make homemade bread, you know. You'll get everyone spoiled."

"I want it to be nice," Julie responded.

Brett pulled her in close for a kiss, then swatted her bottom. "Quit worrying, it's perfect and I love you."

Her response was drowned out by the doorbell. Brett laughed and went to answer the door, checking the peephole before he opened it. He was still on guard.

As soon as introductions were complete, Tom and Brett fell into discussing work and Betsy and Julie got acquainted. Just as Brett suspected, they got along instantly. Shortly the women had migrated to the kitchen to finish up dinner, leaving the men to discuss business in private.

Betsy was so happy to finally meet Julie. Tom had warned her not to ask questions about Parson and that part of her life, but she was free to find out about the wedding and her future plans.

"When do you think you and Brett will get married?" she asked as she sliced the bread.

"As soon as we can arrange it. We really haven't talked about a date yet. We've got so much to do, to settle my father's estate and take care of selling the house," Julie told her.

"Are you planning on working? I could always use some help in the office, writing advertising and stuff," Betsy told her.

"I've thought about that a bit. I'd like that, and maybe others in town too. What I really think I want to try is catering. Nothing too big at first, but I love to cook, and it sounds like fun to me."

"That sounds great to me! This dinner smells delicious and if it tastes near as good as it smells, you'll be a hit!" Betsy said.

The rest of the evening seemed to fly by. While they were doing dishes, Julie asked Betsy about her and Tom.

"Did you always live here? I know Brett said he and Tom have known each other forever and went to college together, but how did you meet Tom?"

"He was born here and so was I. Brett lived in a lot of different places because of his father, but the family was from here. They moved back during high school. I'm a few years behind them and had a huge crush on Tom, but he didn't pay any attention to me. Brett and he were the football stars and then went off to college together. I met back up with Tom after they graduated. That was about it... we went from there... and married," she told Julie.

"That's so sweet. I never had anyone I liked that well in high school. In college I only wanted to get my degree and get out in the world. I had boyfriends I guess, but nothing serious until I was working," Julie replied, and then her face grew sad.

Betsy noticed immediately and hugged her. "It's okay, we don't always have good times."

"I know, but it seemed no one wanted me, they were only were interested in my 'name' or my father's influence. I was so naïve. I thought Robert was different, but man, was I wrong. He was the worst of them."

Betsy didn't quite know where to go with that, so went with her gut feelings.

"Julie, I think you picked the right one this time. Brett is the most honorable of men. We never thought we'd see him happy again after his wife was killed. But you seem to have turned a light on in him, and that's wonderful. You have to be special to do that," Betsy said and waited to see Julie's response.

Julie looked at Betsy a minute then hugged her. "Thank you, that's the nicest thing anyone has said."

They chatted as they finished the dishes and made plans to meet for lunch.

"I have a regional realtor meeting tomorrow, so maybe we could make it Friday? I'd love to show you around town," Betsy said.

"Oh, that sounds good to me. I want to take tomorrow to sort of take stock and settle in a bit. This has happened so fast, that I haven't gotten my feet on the ground yet," Julie replied.

"Great! Friday it is, then. I'll call you tomorrow night and we can make the final arrangements."

Tom and Brett were having coffee in the living room and Betsy and Julie joined them.

"I think this calls for something special," Brett announced. He went into the kitchen and came back with a bottle of champagne. By the time Tom and Betsy left, Julie felt like they were old friends and neighbors. She and Brett were cuddled on the couch enjoying the fire.

"I really like them. Betsy and I are meeting for lunch on Friday. It's great to feel I have a friend already," Julie said.

Brett laughed. "I knew you two would hit it off. Just be careful you don't get in trouble together. Just so you know... Tom spansks too," Brett said.

"Hmmpff... that's awful. You two should stop it." Julie giggled.

"Oh, is that right?" Brett replied as he flipped her over his lap.

"Shall I see how much you think I should stop?" he asked her in a husky voice.

"But I'm a good girl," Julie said and squirmed on his lap, pleased with the results she could feel.

"Yes, but sometimes you need to have a reminder about goodness," Brett said while flipping her dress up and lowering her panties.

Julie giggled and settled in to enjoy the spanking she loved.

Dan Able sat down at his desk and surveyed the accumulated mail and flyers that had come in while he was on vacation. He'd been the Chief of Police for Covington, Virginia for the last twelve years and had been on the force for twenty. It was his policy that all mail and flyers were scanned for importance and then left for him to deal with when he returned from vacation. He started his day early and although he'd only been gone ten days, there was a lot to go through. The mail was finished by eight a.m. and he picked up the flyers, nothing much there until he saw the APB's from the FBI. He looked hard at the one of Robert Parson. The name struck him as familiar and then he remembered why; he'd watched the news conference from the White House. He'd known Brett Rowan for years and was surprised to see him there with Julie Gilbert. Clifton Forge was close and if Parson had seen that newscast, he could very well be around. It wouldn't hurt to show this around to the shop owners and see if anyone had seen him.

"I'm going out to make some rounds," he yelled to the desk sergeant, and pulling on his parka, left for the hardware store. Old man Ames had run that store for years and he never forgot a customer. If Parson had come in for anything, he'd remember.

"Hi Charlie, how's it going today?" he asked the man behind the counter.

"Good, welcome back! How's the family" Charlie greeted him.

"Fine and dandy. Take a look at this for me, will you? See if you've seen this man or anyone who looks like him."

Charlie took the flyer and studied it for a bit. "I think so. Add a mustache and a scraggly beard and some glasses, and yeah. He was here the other day buying some stuff. Said he had a cabin on the mountain over there and needed some things to fix it up," Charlie said, laying the flyer down.

"Remember what he bought?" Dan asked.

"Yeah, some rope, gas can, some other stuff... hang on, I'll get the receipt."

"If he paid with a credit card, get that record too," Dan called after him.

"Okay, name is Richard Parker, here's the slip. Let's see, oh yeah, he bought a gun, ammo, had an owners card in that name also and driver's license from State of Virginia. I told you the rope, gas can, powerful lantern, saw, shovel, and some screws and nails, screwdriver and hammer. Odd thing though, his hands were soft. Didn't look like he'd know how to do any manual work, or that he ever did," Charlie showed Dan the list.

"Thanks Charlie, I'll just take copies of these. If he come again, call it in right away, but don't alarm him."

"Will do, have a good day!" Charlie said, waving as Dan left.

Dan showed the flyer to the local grocery and gas station and both confirmed the I.D.

Once he was back at the station, Dan called the number on the flyer immediately.

"This is Chief of Police Dan Able, I've got several confirmed sightings of Robert Parson here, as recent as the last two days."

It wasn't long before he was talking to Abner. He sat there in silence making notes as Able told him the information he had.

"Thanks Chief, you've been most helpful. If you get him, treat him as dangerous." Abner called and

ordered more men to Brett's house and to the town, then called Brett.

Betsy was chatting with her realtor friends before the lunch started. There was one man from another town that she particularly enjoyed swapping stories with.

"You wouldn't believe who Tom and I had dinner with last night, and who I'm lunching with tomorrow," she taunted him.

"The First Lady?" he asked, chuckling.

"No, but she's been to the White House. It was Julie Gilbert and Sheriff Rowan. They're engaged and getting married soon. He saved her from that bad blizzard and has been protecting her ever since. It would be perfect though if they could catch that Parson guy. It's still a bit of a worry for them."

"Yeah, I keep seeing him on TV and swear he looks familiar, but the name doesn't do a thing for me," he told her.

"Oh, I have a copy of that flyer. See if it does anything for you," Betsy handed him the flyer.

He studied it closely and read what it said about possibly altering his appearance. "You know, this looks like a guy who rented a cabin from me a week ago. I thought it was strange but he wanted it right away, and had a good credit card, so I went ahead. Come to think of it, he was driving a Mercedes too. I'm going to run over to the office and get the record before lunch," he told Betsy and left.

Her heart was thumping hard in her chest when he came back with the record. "Yeah, Richard Parker. Has that place on the mountain overlooking the Rowan place."

"I better call Tom right away," Betsy said and pulled out her cell phone.

Tom was already at work when Brett got in about nine a.m.

"Seems weird to be here," he commented.

"You weren't gone that long," Tom told him.

"Let's go over the last week over coffee," Brett said, and he and Tom left for the diner.

Once they were seated and enjoying coffee and a roll, Tom told him, "We really enjoyed last night. Julie is a great cook. Betsy hasn't quit talking about her since."

"Thanks, I'm glad they hit it off. Julie needs a friend to get her started here. I want her to be happy." Brett said.

"Betsy will see that she is in the thick of things in no time at all. Could be trouble for us down the road, though. I have a feeling they'll be into mischief," Tom replied.

Brett laughed. "Julie knows what will happen to her if she takes things too far."

They started reviewing the week, when both their phones rang. Each had a hard look on their faces when they hung up.

"That was Abner," he told Tom. "Parson has been sighted in Covington. He's sending men to the house now. I've got to get to the ranch."

"I'm coming too. That was Betsy. Her friend the realtor in Bushy Creek rented him a cabin overlooking your ranch a week ago."

Chapter Fifteen

After Brett left for work and Mary was busy in the kitchen, Julie wandered around the house looking at things closely, trying to decide what could be incorporated in from her father's home. She was edgy and decided that fresh air would help.

"Mary, I'm going out to the barn and see the horses. If I decide to take a ride, I'll let you know," Julie told her.

The barn was wonderful and she decided to comb down the horse she loved the most. Brett had said it could be hers. She was really happy and peaceful. More so than she'd been in a long time.

Robert hadn't slept well at all. He sat watching the morning news and stewed over his lukewarm coffee. This waiting was getting on his nerves. If Julie and Rowan didn't show up today, he was heading south.

He grew tired of the news; for once there was no mention of him or the scandal. He showered and dressed but still felt restless. Damn it, he was bored! Bored and worried. He had no idea who, other than the FBI, was looking for him; he had to act. After fretting for a while, he decided to go take a look at the ranch for the last time. He'd give it half an hour and if nothing happened, he was gone.

The time was almost up when he noticed some activity at the back door of the house. He raised his binoculars and focused in on the ranch yard. What he saw had him leering evilly. He looked like a devil as he spotted Julie.

"I got you now, you bitch!" he yelled into the air. "It's even better that it seems! Your protector's not around." Gleefully, Robert went back to the cabin and got the stuff he'd need.

It took him a bit to pack the car with his clothes and what he felt he'd need on the road. He didn't intend to return here once he'd taken care of Julie and whoever got in his way. Personally, he thought toasting a half-alive Julie would be a nice touch. She'd feel every lick of the fire until she was dead. She'd be pleading for her life before he was done with her. Even the thought of it had him excited and growing hard. That was fine; he intended to satisfy that itch thoroughly before he was done.

Tom was busy on the radio in the squad car, sending instructions to the men in town, while Brett called Abner again.

"Tom's wife found out from a realtor friend that Parson rented a cabin on the hill overlooking my place. Tom and I are on the way there, but if you have any help readily available I'd appreciate it," Brett told him, barely able to speak, his heart was beating so hard.

"They're on the way, Brett, should be there about the same time you are. I'll get state police on that cabin too. Call the house and alert Julie and Mary, make sure they lock up and don't let anyone in," Abner said and hung up to call the state police.

Julie came back to the house and got the list of items she'd quickly made the day before. Mary was still in the kitchen, busy baking something that smelled delicious. Julie grabbed the list and a measuring tape from a drawer.

"I just had a great idea of something to do with those extra rooms in the back of the barn. I want to map them out a bit and draw up some plans for Brett to look at," Julie told her and left for the barn again.

Robert left the cabin, giggling at the thought of what was ahead. He pulled into the drive of the ranch, jumped out and slammed the car door. He was full of adrenaline at the thought of what he was about to do - Julie Gilbert had about an hour to live... and what an hour it would be.

Mary heard the car door slam and saw Parson before he saw her. Quickly, she locked the door and set the alarms, then went to the office and called Brett.

"Rowan here," Brett answered, expecting it to be Abner.

"Brett, that man, Parson, just pulled into the driveway! I locked the doors and alarmed them, but Julie's in the barn and doesn't know he's here," Mary told him breathlessly as Parson started pounding on the door.

Brett's jaw clenched as he heard the background noise. He floored the car and put the lights on. "Stay where you are! I'm about five minutes away, and other help is on the way, too. Pray that Julie stays where she is." Brett hung up and told Tom what was going on.

Tom pulled the rifle from the back mount and made sure it was fully loaded. He felt they'd need it before the morning was over.

Robert was growing furious. He knew she was in there, knew the hired woman was too. Both of them were dead meat now. He didn't like having his plans interrupted. He tried all the doors and debated shooting the lock off, but knew that would set off the alarm, and he wasn't sure where that would be reported to and how long it would be before someone came. He couldn't take the chance. He sat on the back stoop and tried to calm down to think. It was then he heard singing, and glanced at the barn. His leer came back and he quickly crossed the yard to the barn, slamming open the door.

Julie was happily singing and measuring when she heard the door slam open. She whirled around and screamed when she saw Robert standing there.

"Scared you?" Robert said, sneering at her. "You're going to be a lot more scared in a bit. I've dreamed of this, you damned bitch, since the day you ran away. You've ruined my life and a lot of others, but I plan on getting my revenge right now. You were never worth the time I spent on you, but now... you aren't worth shit."

Julie thought her heart would explode when she saw Robert take his gun to level it at her.

"How did you get here?" she asked. It was the only thought that entered her brain. Frantically, she was trying to figure out what to do. She knew that Mary was in the house, and Brett was in town. It would take him at least twenty minutes to get here, if Mary saw Parson and called. For one terrifying moment, she wondered if Robert had been to the house and had hurt Mary.

"I always was smarter than you, Julie, you're just a dumb bitch. Only good thing about you was your father, and you were easy on the eyes. Now, I aim to make sure that no one will ever look at you again. There won't be an open coffin at your wake. Might not even find your body... haven't decided yet," Robert growled and stepped closer.

"You're stupid, Robert! You think I'm here unprotected? Give it another thought. You weren't smart enough to make it on your own... always had to use people... just was a matter of time until someone shoved you aside. I'd never have married you. Think about it, there are people right now closing in on you. You're the one who's in trouble... not me!"

Robert was enraged at her words. His vision actually blurred, he was so angry and out of control. Julie saw his eyes drift away and used that second to dart behind a bale of hay and grab a pitchfork.

Robert lunged after her; now he was too angry to think of anything but killing her. As he approached, she held the pitchfork out in front of her.

Just then, Brett, Tom and three FBI agents burst into the barn. Brett saw Parson with the gun advancing on Julie and yelled. "Stop right there! You're under arrest!"

Robert ignored him and pointed the gun at Julie, right as she threw the pitchfork at him. It caught him in his groin. His yell of pain was almost deafening. He fell to the ground and Brett ran to Julie, pulling her behind him. One of the agents tried to get her out of the barn, but she pulled away from him. Robert still was holding the gun, now leveled at Brett.

"I wouldn't think about it, Parson. There are four guns aimed at you. You even look like you're

going to shoot, and you're dead," Brett informed him

Parson looked around, his eyes swimming and blood pouring from the still-intense pain in his groin. He spat once, raised his gun to his temple, and fired.

There was silence in the barn for a moment before Julie screamed and broke free of the agent trying to get her out of the barn. She ran to Brett, afraid it was him that was shot.

Brett saw the shock on her face and tried to turn her before she saw the remains of Parsons' head. He wasn't fast enough, though, and Julie gasped and gagged. As she started to sag, Brett picked her up and carried her out.

Tom called to him as he left, "Stay with her, we'll take care of things here."

Brett carried Julie to their room and laid her on the bed. Somewhere along the way, she'd passed out. Mary scurried into the room and took charge.

"Go get some cold cloths and water. She's fine, just fainted," she ordered Brett. She noticed that his face was as white as Julie's. Her imagination could figure out what had happened in the barn.

Brett handed Mary the towels and she placed them on Julie's head and the back of her neck. She propped her in a sitting position. A few seconds later, Julie moaned and her eyes flew open.

"Brett... where's Brett?" she asked in a terrified voice.

"I'm right here," Brett told her. He sat down and pulled her into his arms, holding her just like he had when she'd been sick.

"I thought he killed you. I was so scared!" Julie cried. "Then when I saw him, I just lost it."

"You did great, Julie. I'm proud of you, you did just fine," Brett cooed to her, rocking her gently in his arms.

Mary returned to the kitchen and Tom came in with one of the FBI men.

"We're probably going to have a lot of company for the next few hours. How're things here?" he asked.

"It's fine. Julie was just shocked, but Brett is with her. I think they just need a bit of time together. I'll start another pot of coffee. I've got plenty of food, so you guys come eat anytime you want," Mary told him.

Brett found one of the pills that Doc had prescribed to calm Julie and gave her one. He held her until she fell asleep, then covered her and left the room. He needed to help his men and the others.

It was a long grueling job to close things up. The state police and the FBI took over and finally allowed the body to be removed. It would be a formality, but an autopsy would be performed to document the cause of death.

One of the paramedics drew Brett aside. "I don't know how much will come out, but he most likely would have died from that groin wound. The fork hit a major artery. Just thought I'd let you know in case you want to prepare Ms. Gilbert."

"Thanks, I appreciate that," Brett told him. He took a break to check on Julie and found her in the kitchen helping Mary. He hugged her to him and looked at her face.

"Feel better?" he asked, softly kissing her.

"I'm fine. You must be starved, though. Can you guys take a break and eat something?"

"You're amazing. I love you so much!" he told her, kissing her hard then letting her go.

A few minutes later, the dining room table was filled with hungry men enjoying sandwiches, soup and coffee.

Brett finished up and he and a detective from the State Police and an FBI agent came into the kitchen.

"Julie, they need to take a statement from you. Are you up to it now?" Brett asked.

"I'd like to get it over with," she said. "Do you want to do it now?"

An hour later, Brett and Julie were finally alone together. Mary had cleaned up the kitchen and all the police and press were gone.

Julie climbed onto Brett's lap and hugged him hard, then lay her head down on his shoulder and said softly, "I'm so glad I broke down here."

Epilogue

Betsy fussed around the room arranging pillows and toys. She wanted this to be perfect for Brett and Julie when they arrived. Julie Rowan was her best and closest friend - this was her present to her.

The crib was polished and the white pique curtains framed the windows perfectly. Mary had washed and ironed them and the crib covers. Betsy knew that Julie planned on using the cradle in their room for a bit, but she wanted this room to be ready too, in case she changed her mind.

Tom came into the room and put his arms around Betsy, pulling her close. "Remember a year ago?" he asked her.

"Yes, how horrid things were then, but they've worked out fine, haven't they?" she replied, resting against him and patting her own swollen stomach.

"Let's go down and wait for them," Tom said guiding her down the stairs. He wanted her to rest as much as possible, she was due in a few weeks.

As they sat on the couch waiting, Betsy's thoughts drifted back.

After the hubbub surrounding Robert Parson's death had subsided, Julie and Brett were busy making plans and settling things with her father's estate. They'd added on several rooms to the house and converted rooms at the back of the barn into an office and large kitchen and storage area for Julie.

Betsy had hired Julie to write some advertising for her and it was so successful that several others had enlisted her help as well. The catering business was a huge hit, too. Julie never did anything large, like wedding receptions, but preferred the smaller parties in people's homes. If Brett hadn't reined her in a bit, she would have been working seven days a week.

Betsy sighed as she thought of the warm April day almost a year ago.

"This veil just isn't going to stay on in the wind," Julie complained to Betsy and Mary for the third time. "I think now we should just have eloped," she said again.

"Calm down, you're just nervous," Mary said, pinning the veil tighter into the blond curls swept up on Julie's head. "Frank's downstairs waiting for you, and Brett's as nervous as you are."

Finally, Julie took a deep breath. "Do I look all right? I think I'm ready," she stuttered out.

Betsy hugged her gently. "You're fine! A half-hour from now, you'll be so relaxed and calm."

With a weak smile, Julie left her room and walked downstairs behind Mary and Betsy. The wedding was taking place outside and Brett and Tom were already out there with the minister. All the guests were seated in the chairs and the musicians were playing softly. It looked perfect, but Julie was shaking.

"Calm down, sweetie, it's fine," Frank said, taking her arm and leading her down the aisle. Mary was seated in the first pew where Frank would join her after giving Julie to Brett. Betsy, as maid of honor, was waiting for Julie in front.

Brett smiled warmly at Julie and took her hand from Frank. The rest was a blur to Julie until Brett held her and kissed her.

"I'm really Mrs. Rowan now, aren't I?" she asked, smiling at him.

"Yes, you are," Brett replied and kissed her again.

A phone ringing somewhere snapped Betsy's thoughts away from the wedding. Frank and Mary came into the room and joined them.

"That was Brett, they're leaving now and will be here in about a half-hour," said Frank.

"I have dinner ready for them, so as soon as they're settled, we're heading back to the hotel," Mary told them.

"We are too," Tom said. "I just can't miss this moment in Brett's life."

"When are you two getting married?" Betsy asked Mary.

"Next month, as soon as Julie can travel," Frank answered.

Frank had traveled to Clifton Forge so often to see Julie and Brett, that it was only a matter of time before he and Mary became friends and then more. Both had been widowed for a while, and it seemed their common interest in Brett and Julie just brought them closer.

Julie was ecstatic when they'd announced they were marrying. She felt like she finally had a mother she'd never known, and Frank was now like her father.

The two couples chatted back and forth, but all jumped to their feet when they heard the sound of tires crunching gravel on the road.

Brett helped Julie from the car and then reached into the backseat. He tenderly picked up the small bundle wrapped in a pink blanket and handed it to

Julie. Four adults standing on the porch were misty eyed at the sight of the new family.

"Oh my, let me see her," Mary cooed and took the baby from Julie.

Everyone hugged Julie and Brett and the little bundle was passed around. Finally Brett managed to claim his daughter back.

"How do you like your new home, Lauryn?" he asked, nuzzling the small baby.

She answered with a whimper and Julie took her back. "I think she's hungry and could probably use a nap."

"So could her mom," Brett said.

On that note, the four others left, promising to come again the next day.

"If you need anything at all, you call me," Mary told her, kissing her cheek.

Julie sat down and rocked Lauryn as she nursed. "She's just the most precious thing I've ever seen," she said, looking at Brett, who stood behind her, rubbing her shoulders.

"Yes she is, just like her mom," he responded and kissed the back of Julie's neck.

"I am a bit tired. Let's go up and rest a while," Julie said, handing the baby to Brett.

They stopped at the open door of the nursery and smiled.

"Look what they did!" Julie told Brett. "They fixed the nursery just like it was for me when I was little. I think Lauryn has her own room."

Julie lowered the baby into the crib and covered her. Brett pulled her close to him and both smiled down on the life they'd created.

"I love you," Brett told them both.

"I love you, too," Julie responded and they left the room to go to theirs.

Life with the Rowans in Clifton Forge was wonderful.

