



STACEY JOY NETZEL PENS A TALE OF FAMILY SECRETS  
ENTWINED WITH A SMOLDERING ROMANCE  
THAT CURLS THE EDGES OF THE PAGES

CAROL ERICSON, HARLEQUIN INTRIGUE AUTHOR

# SHATTERED TRUST

STACEY JOY NETZEL

**“Something about you got my attention  
from the moment we met.”**

That struck her as funny. “Would that have been my bra?”

Justin grinned. “There was that. But it was only half as intriguing as the woman wearing it.”

She rolled her eyes to combat the unfamiliar thrill his words evoked.

He lifted a hand to rest on her shoulder. Gave a gentle squeeze. “Everything okay now?”

She nodded as his thumb skimmed the pulse at the base of her throat. When his touch returned to rest over the throbbing point, she felt a steady increase and knew he did too.

*Curiosity killed the cat, Marley.*

Cats have nine lives.

His head lowered toward hers. His gaze dropped to her mouth. The first brush of his warm lips against hers made her sway closer. She closed her eyes and lifted her chin for a better connection. When she braced one hand on his chest for support, she was shocked to feel his heart thundering beneath her palm.

His other arm slid over her hip and around her waist to pull her against him. The nerve endings in her entire body came alive, overwhelming her with unfamiliar sensations. She suddenly felt as if she’d had one too many beers on a sweltering summer night.

Then his mouth opened on hers. His hot, wet tongue slid along the seam of her lips before pushing through to her teeth. It startled her. It excited her.

Okay, so her handful of kisses had been back in the fifth grade, when a half-second peck on the lips during spin the bottle was a major deal.

*This was a major deal!*

*No, Marley, kissing an employee is a major deal.*

## Praise for Stacey Joy Netzel

"[*MISTLETOE RULES*] is the best e-book I've read in a while and an absolutely delightful Christmas treat."

~*Water Lily, LASR Best Book; \*\*1st place 2010 Write Touch Readers' Award, \*\*Night Owl Reviewer Top Pick*

"Stacey Joy Netzel has written her most compelling story yet. *CHASIN' MASON* is 'must-read' phenomenal!"

~*Donna Marie Rogers, author of Meant To Be*

"Four related tales told by two very talented authors make this anthology a keeper. With their easy, breezy style and skilled characterizations, Rogers and Netzel have created a town that readers won't want to leave."

~*Romantic Times BOOKreviews on WELCOME TO REDEMPTION (4 1/2 \*Stars\*); \*\*Night Owl Reviewer Top Pick, \*\*Dark Angel Reviews Recommended Read*

"*IF TOMBSTONES COULD TALK* is a sweet and romantic read. The plot was brilliant and well played out. I enjoyed every aspect of the story; I only wish it were longer. Congratulations, Ms. Netzel, on a lovely tale."

~*Dark Angel Reviews (5 Stars)*

"I adored *DRAGONFLY DREAMS*. Once I started reading, it was hard to stop. It is a tale that tugs at the heart and makes one feel the Christmas season any time of the year. Stacey Joy Netzel pens an engaging read where emotions run high and love runs deeper. So sit back and enjoy a page-turner that warms all the way to the toes. You won't be disappointed in this splendid story."

~*Fallen Angel Reviews (5 Angels), \*\*Nominated LASR Best Short Romance eBook 2007*

# Shattered Trust

by

Stacey Joy Netzel

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

## **Shattered Trust**

COPYRIGHT © 2011 by Stacey Joy Netzel

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or The Wild Rose Press except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: [info@thewildrosepress.com](mailto:info@thewildrosepress.com)

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

The Wild Rose Press

PO Box 706

Adams Basin, NY 14410-0706

Visit us at [www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com)

Publishing History

First Crimson Rose Edition, 2011

Print ISBN 1-60154-905-9

Published in the United States of America

## **Dedication**

To my dear friends in WisRWA, and most especially  
those in the Greater Green Bay Area.  
Thank you for all your encouragement and support!







## Chapter 1

Justin Blake straightened in the seat of his battered Jeep when an old pickup truck slid to a stop in front of the general contractor's trailer amidst a cloud of dust. The door flew open and bare legs flashed as a woman in an—*orange?*—business suit sprinted the few feet to the trailer, her skirt hiked above her knees and shoeless feet. She lugged a duffle bag up the wooden steps, unlocked the door and disappeared inside.

If she had a key, she could only be Marley Wade.

Bare feet on a construction site? He frowned. What kind of operation was she running here? His gaze narrowed on the trailer bathed in bright light as the July sun rose over the city of Boulder, Colorado. Not only did he have to pose as a construction worker in his newly inherited company, but he'd have to take orders from a woman who obviously didn't know what she was doing.

He wished he'd had more time for research before jumping in like this, but as his brother had pointed out, they had to act fast. Only a small window of opportunity existed in which to discover if the name Jordan found scratched on the paper clutched in Granddad's hand had anything to do with his death.

It'd barely been legible, but the first three letters appeared to be *Mar* and the last spelled *Wade*. Jordan had found two possibilities: Mark Wade, who it turned out had died three months ago in a car accident, and his daughter, Marley Wade, who'd taken over her father's general contractor

duties on this job site.

Despite a measly three hours of sleep after his flight from Toronto had been delayed, Justin knew it was now or never. If this site held the key to Granddad's death, when everyone discovered his identity as the new co-owner of Hunter Construction, they'd clam up faster than a guilty murder suspect lawyers up. Especially Ms. Wade.

He noticed other workers starting to arrive and grabbed the letter from headquarters Jordan had given him while opening his door. Time to introduce himself to the boss. He nodded to a few of the men who glanced his way with curiosity. At the trailer, he took the steps in two strides and gave the door a brisk rap.

A muffled reply took a moment to decipher as permission to enter.

Marley Wade pulled her jeans over her hips, frowning at the interruption of her precious minutes. She expected punctuality from the men; no way could she be late.

The door creaked behind her and she spun around in surprise. Her hands froze on the button of her jeans when she saw a man pause in the doorway of her trailer. A tall, blond man who—

Belatedly realizing he stared at her white cotton bra, she snatched a tee shirt out of her bag and stepped sideways so no one else could see inside from the job site.

"I said *'Hold on a minute'*," she snapped.

"Sorry. I, ah, I misunderstood."

For probably the first time in her life, Marley felt herself blush as she pulled her tee shirt over her head. The accompanying flutter in her stomach set her on edge. Men didn't embarrass her. She was just one of the guys; always had been.

And he needed to stop looking at her like she was a new set of power tools on Christmas morning.

She lifted her chin and met his gaze dead-on as she pulled her ponytail free of her shirt. "What can I do for you?"

He actually had the balls to grin. Lucky for him, he kept his eyes on her face.

He stepped forward and offered a hand. "Justin Bl—uh—Blackman."

She fit her palm against his after only a slight hesitation. A flash of surprise registered in his expression with her firm grip. "Marley Wade. I'm the general contractor."

He released her hand and extended a folded piece of paper. "Just the person I need to talk to."

After a glance at the letter from Hunter's HR department, it was Marley's turn to be surprised. Justin Blackman was reporting for his first day of work, but she hadn't asked for any additional men on her team. Needed them, yes, but didn't have enough in the budget to ask for another worker.

She took a step back to judge his physique. Taller than her by a few inches, probably just over six feet, he had a wide chest and incredible muscled arms showcased by a sleeveless black tee shirt. A worn pair of jeans encased his lean hips and muscular thighs.

Nice. Calendar quality *nice*.

She swallowed in an attempt to wet her suddenly dry mouth. What the hell? She looked at men with his build all the time without so much as a twinge of awareness. *Stick to the job, Marley*. She strode past him to stand behind her desk. With its expanse between them, she felt more in control. "Are you from around here?"

"Used to be."

His clipped reply brought her head up. "You looking for a permanent position, or just passing through?"

He hesitated before answering. "I'm not sure,

yet.”

*At least he's truthful.* “You got references?”

“I was under the impression I was already hired.”

The words were spoken politely enough, yet she caught an edge that told her he didn't appreciate her line of questioning. She fixed him with a level stare. “I wouldn't care if you owned the company, Mr. Blackman, I still have final say as to who works on my job site.”

His entire body stiffened and his jaw clenched. Either he wasn't used to answering to a woman, or he plain didn't like it. *Tough.* The urge to send him packing surged forward, HR be damned, but common sense pointed out the benefits of extra manpower. Emphasis on *man*.

Annoyed with that last thought, she turned over the letter he'd brought from human resources, snapped a pen on top, and slid it across the desk.

“Names and numbers.”

He withdrew a piece of paper from his back pocket and advanced to hand her the slip. A neatly printed list of three names and numbers. One, a local contractor she knew to be well respected but had never met, and the other two had out-of-state numbers. Why so defensive when he'd obviously anticipated the question?

“Shall I wait outside while you call?” he inquired.

Oh, how she'd love to make him wait, but the day wasn't getting any younger. Bright rays of sunshine struggled through the dusty window. “You brought your gear?”

“Of course.”

She gave a brisk nod and reached for one of the folders stacked on the desk corner. “Show me what you can do today and we'll talk tomorrow. Chuck Hager is the supervisor, he'll show you where to

start. Tell him I'll be out shortly."

She transferred her complete attention to the folder contents, a dismissive tactic she'd learned from her father. Justin Blackman remained in front of her desk. Marley gave him a practiced absent glance and saw he looked like he wanted to say something. Like he was biting his tongue with the effort of *not* saying it.

"You'll be paid for your time either way," she assured him.

He still didn't move. She leaned forward just enough to emphasize her authority. "Was there something else?"

His gold-flecked gaze flicked down for a split second, then rose again. "No." He turned for the door. Almost as an afterthought on his way out, he added, "Thanks."

The second she confirmed the click of the door, Marley sank into her chair and heaved a shaky breath. Hell and damnation. She pressed her palms to her heated cheeks. Why in the world had she agreed to give him a chance? Any man who could make her insides all jittery like this was bound to be trouble. She didn't have these kinds of feelings; didn't *want* these kinds of feelings!

*Beggars can't be choosers, Marley, and you have to get this build back on the right track. Dad would've expected it—demanded it even.*

Her throat constricted with the thought of her father. He inflicted unbearable pressure even from the grave, but she ruthlessly suppressed her grief. She had to be as tough as any of the men out there or risk losing their respect.

\*\*\*\*\*

Justin made his way down the steps, a little out of sorts, but not entirely sure why. When he'd knocked, he could've sworn she said to come in. Seeing her half-clothed had surprised him, and then,

even after she'd donned that modest tee shirt, he had a hard time keeping his eyes from straying down again.

Not that looking at her face took any effort. Her vibrant green eyes, framed by long lashes darker than her chestnut hair, were almost as compelling as the full lips that had glistened from a swipe of her pink tongue.

Her natural, make-up free appearance was as refreshing as it was distressing. He needed to focus on her and this job site, not get distracted by the way she looked.

But there'd been something else about her, too. She'd stood toe to toe with him after being caught in an embarrassing situation. She hadn't flown into hysterics, yelling and screaming for him to leave. Considering the way he'd stared, she justifiably could have. Most of the women he had experience with would've done exactly that until they figured out how to effectively manipulate the situation to their advantage.

The only sign that the situation had affected Marley Wade had been a brief flush across her cheeks. Just as quick, she'd faced him across the desk with a cool expression, and in a slightly husky voice he realized was her natural tone, she'd proceeded to give him the third degree.

Idiot that he was, he'd almost blown it by getting cocky. That crack about him owning the company hadn't helped. His heart had stopped for a moment as he wondered what she suspected—if she knew. Then he realized she would've called him on it. A straightforward woman like her, Marley Wade wasn't the type to put up with any bullshit.

Damn it. He didn't want to like her, let alone respect her. His step slowed as that thought revealed what really bothered him. She'd passed his first test. He'd brought the list of references because

in her position, he always asked for them. He just hadn't expected her to demand them. Based on what he'd seen, it was a sure bet the couple minutes before she came out would be spent on the phone. Good thing he'd made sure the guys who'd offer up honest reports of his past job performances wouldn't blow his cover.

It was absurd, though, to be relieved he'd pass muster when he was the one who now signed her paycheck.

\*\*\*\*

Marley finished tying her steel-toed work boots, adjusted her tool belt where it rested low on her hips, and exited the trailer with hardhat in hand. Apparently, Justin Blackman was more than just a pretty face and damn fine body. He was a damn fine construction worker as well. She'd called two of his references and both assured her they'd rehire him on a moment's notice.

None of which made her feel any better about her reaction to him.

*Don't make it personal, Marley.*

Her father's voice snuck through on that admonishment, and she paused to take a deep breath. She could do this, just like he'd taught her. She'd make him proud even if he wasn't here to see it.

For the better part of the morning, she kept her distance, watching Justin work while she reviewed work orders, verified and signed for deliveries, spoke to the electrician, called the bank, and went over the schedule with Chuck Hager for the rest of the week.

Justin appeared competent and conscientious, as his references testified. Every move he made was based on efficiency, furthering his efforts without wasting motion, alleviating any doubt that he knew his way around a construction site.

Once she realized she enjoyed watching the play

of his muscles as he lifted sheets of plywood, she focused her attention elsewhere. Then she found herself facing him across their improvised plywood picnic table as the crew broke for lunch. Marley ate with her men to show she wasn't above them—that she was one of them; something else her dad had drilled her on.

“Any word who’s taking over Hunter?” Tom Jones asked from across the table to her left.

Marley shook her head. “Nothing official yet.”

She took another bite of turkey on whole wheat and wondered when an announcement would be made. The uncertainty had everyone on edge, especially her, though she refused to let it show.

“Last week Bonnie said she heard the old man left it all to his grandkids.”

All attention shifted to redheaded Warren, whose wife, Bonnie, worked as a secretary at Hunter Construction headquarters in Boulder’s Industrial Park. The men began offering up guesses of what would become of the company, and Marley noticed Justin’s silence. Understandable since he was new, but no time like the present to let him know how she ran things.

“All right, come on, guys. You’ll know what’s going on as soon as I do. Until then, I don’t want to hear any more speculation—that’s how rumors start. Besides, I seriously doubt anyone has anything to worry about.”

No sooner had she spoken than Nate’s blue pickup pulled into the dusty lot. She frowned as her brother slammed the door before making his way toward where they all sat at the makeshift table.

He swiped one of Marley’s carrot sticks and straddled the bench next to her. “My lunch in the trailer?”

“Yeah.” She started packing up her things as she stood. Careful to keep her voice neutral, Marley



said, "I need to talk to you."

Nate shrugged as he turned toward Tom. "I'll be there in a minute."

Dead silence descended upon the table. Warren discreetly rolled his eyes, Chuck looked at his watch, and Tom's eyebrows rose. Everyone avoided her gaze except Justin Blackman, and she avoided his as her jaw clenched. She lifted her cooler from the table with deliberate calm and injected iron into her words. "Now, please."

Nate's back stiffened. He shoved up from the table and stalked toward the trailer. Damn him. He'd been like this lately. *Since Dad died*. Well, she missed him, too. Didn't see her acting like an irresponsible ass, though, did he?

Marley closed the door firmly behind her and faced her younger brother. "Don't disrespect me in front of the guys like that. You know how much harder I have to work than Dad did."

He crossed his arms over his chest with an impatient look. "This is what you wanted to talk about?"

She huffed in exasperation. He didn't understand; probably never would. Might as well get to the part she could spell out in black and white. "You're late again."

"I had a few errands to run before I came in."

"If you're going to be late, you need to clear it with me or Chuck like everyone else so we can keep the schedule covered. Every time you're late it puts us further behind."

"Quit blaming me for your problems."

*Deep breath. Don't lose your cool.* "Nate, are you deliberately trying to ruin things, or are you really that stupid?"

His eyes narrowed. "You know, Mar, ever since Dad died you've been a bitch."

Moisture sprang to her eyes, but she furiously

blinked it away. She would not let him twist this around. "I don't run things any differently than Dad did."

"Yeah, you're more like dear ol' Dad every day."

"Actually," she bit out, "I cut you a helluva lot more slack than Dad ever would have. You've changed so much since his accident..." One tear slipped out, and she softened her tone as she swiped it away. "What's going on, Nate? This isn't like you."

His expression hardened even more. He ran a hand through his blond hair but didn't say a word. Wouldn't even look at her.

"You can't keep going on like this. I'd have fired anyone else by now and you know it." She pointed out the window toward the men. "*They* know it."

He reached for the door handle. "You wouldn't fire your own brother."

He shouldn't put her in the position of having to. "Nate."

He paused halfway through the door and looked back. The defiant jut of his chin pierced her heart from across the room.

"They know it, and so do you," she said softly.

His expression turned obstinate. "Fine, fire me. I'm not going to need this job much longer anyway."

He slammed out the door, and Marley stared after him with a frown. What the heck did that mean? He still had a year and a half before he earned his architectural master's degree like she had this past spring and college wasn't free.

All along they'd planned for her to get an internship—hopefully with Hunter—while he finished school. Then they'd open their own firm with him interning under her until he took his registration examination.

At least that'd been the plan until a few months ago; until Dad died and Nate had become a different person. She'd tried to talk to him countless times,

knowing he grieved just like her, but each time he clammed up and gave her the cold shoulder. The distance between them seemed to widen every day.

She couldn't continue to jeopardize her job—her entire life—because he refused to deal with whatever issues he needed to resolve. She couldn't afford to give him any more chances. In this man's world, she had to work twice as hard every day to prove she could keep control of the site.

What did it say for that control when her own brother walked in late no less than three times this week? Dad had taught them both to be tough, to do what was needed to get the job done. Now, with him gone, his guidance was the only thing she could fall back on. Brother or not, she'd do what needed to be done. She had no choice.

## Chapter 2

Justin heard the apartment door open just as he twisted the cap off his beer. Noting the time on the clock on the opposite wall, he reached back into his brother's fridge and grabbed another long neck bottle.

He made his way into the living room, smiling at Jordan as he offered the unopened bottle.

Jordan took the beer as he strode past. "Good man."

"How'd your day go?"

With a flick of his thumb, Jordan flipped the top across the counter into the kitchen sink, then turned and eyed Justin up and down as he took a long drink. "Better than yours."

Justin glanced down at his dusty work boots, old jeans, and the black tee shirt he'd torn the sleeves off at some point. "Ah, but I like working outdoors in the dirt."

Jordan rolled his eyes and laid his charcoal gray suit jacket across the back of his black leather couch before sitting down.

"You used to like it, too," Justin reminded him.

"I grew up."

Justin gave a short laugh. He moved to sit across from Jordan, but caught his brother's frown and decided he'd better shower first. "Are you missing the ad agency already?"

"I didn't get into all the construction stuff as much as you did when we were kids. After you left, I can count on one hand the number of times I stopped at Granddad and Dad's offices, and it wasn't in the

past five years. It'll take a little time before I'm used to all you boys and your toys," Jordan said with a grimace.

"Granddad did pretty well with his toys."

"So it seemed."

His brother's tone made Justin pause with his bottle halfway to his mouth. "Yeah?"

Jordan shifted. "The further I dig, the more it looks like Mom and Cassie got the better end of the deal."

"How so? The company is worth a lot more than the half-mil each of them got. Why else would Dad be so pissed off about us inheriting instead of him and Mom?"

"The company is in the red, and if this year continues like it has, it'll be bankrupt before July. Everything is mortgaged to the hilt."

Without invitation, a picture of Marley Wade striding across the way-over-budget Forrester job site flashed in Justin's mind. He willed her away. She had no business intruding. The job site, well, that was another matter.

"A month? That's all you give it?" Justin asked. "Except for the site I'm on, I thought things were going well. With all the jobs in progress and the others lined up—"

Jordan shook his head. "Won't make a difference unless we do some major restructuring or lock in a high profile project so our loans can be extended. Maybe even both if we want to keep the doors open."

"So Granddad was just as good at keeping up appearances as the rest of the family." Justin took a pull of his beer and acknowledged a disturbing stab of disappointment. His grandfather had done good for this city, and the state of Colorado. He'd been involved in charity projects for as long as Justin could remember, so what was there to be disappointed in? There was a difference between

doing the right thing for the right reasons, and doing only what would make you look good in the public eye. Right?

"I hate to say it, but looks like Mom and Dad learned from an expert."

Jordan's comment added weight to Justin's unrest.

"Speaking of family, Cassie called today. From Europe."

Justin's brows shot up, though he knew he shouldn't be surprised she'd already jet-setted to the other side of the world. Every so often, he wished he and his sister were as close as he and Jordan. Unfortunately, they'd never quite seen eye to eye. "She's not mad anymore?"

"Never was—or so she says."

"I suppose not. If she'd inherited a third of Hunter, she would've had to work."

Jordan laughed. "Picture her on a construction site."

Justin pictured Marley Wade. He shook his head to clear the image. "That's almost as funny as Mom on the job site—or in an office even."

"Like mother, like daughter was written for them."

Unfortunately, Justin wholeheartedly agreed. "You tell Cassie about the company's troubles?"

"Hell no. She would've started gloating."

Justin tipped his bottle at his brother from where he'd leaned a hip against the chair he couldn't sit on. "True, and that's never been pretty."

After a moment, Jordan asked, "You find anything out about Marley Wade?"

"Not much besides the fact that she runs a tight ship—and did you know her brother Nate works there, too?"

"Yeah, but I focused on the names that started with M.A.R. Does he have anything to do with this?"

"I didn't have a chance to talk to him yet." Though from what Justin had seen, he wasn't impressed.

Jordan rested his elbows on his knees and fingered the label on his beer bottle. "Someone in that family's gotta be connected somewhere, otherwise why would Granddad scribble one of their names on a piece of paper as he's dying?"

"I'll see what I can dig up over the next few days...try to get close to one or both of them."

"How long can you stay?" Jordan asked.

"My boss pulled someone from Vancouver to cover long enough to give me a month leave-of-absence."

"Just a month? You own half the company now, why don't you quit?"

Justin went on the defensive even though Jordan sounded more disappointed than angry. "I like Toronto. I didn't ask you to quit your job—that was your decision. I'm not ready to do more than a leave just yet."

Jordan held up a hand. "Fair enough." Then he grinned. "So how do you like having a woman for a boss?"

"It's no big deal."

"What's she look like?"

*Too damn attractive.* He kept that thought to himself and deflected Jordan's question. "She's a woman in construction—what do you think she looks like?"

"One can only hope, like Pamela Anderson."

Justin snorted, then considered. Marley's natural appeal far surpassed Pamela Anderson in his opinion, even though she had a smaller chest. Not too small, though, just big enough—

"I'd work under Pamela Anderson any day," Jordan added.

Annoyed, Justin straightened and headed for

the kitchen. "You'd work under anyone in a skirt."

Jordan chuckled and sing-songed, "Someone likes their boss."

"I thought you said you grew up," Justin grouched. He threw his empty bottle into the recycle and heard the glass shatter when it impacted the other bottles at the bottom.

"I was joking," Jordan said from behind him.

Justin bit back a sigh of frustration and took Jordan's bottle to drop it in the bin. "I know, sorry. It's just that I've had a few too many surprises today—and that bomb you dropped about the finances certainly doesn't help."

Jordan clapped him on the shoulder. "You do your job, I'll do mine."

"Yeah, yeah." Over his shoulder on his way to the bathroom for a shower, he asked, "Same time tomorrow?"

"You know it." After two more steps, Jordan called after him, "You need to live a little, bro. You're growing old way too fast."

Easy for Jordan to say, he thought as he stepped under the needle-like spray a minute later. Jordan had followed the Blake family motto and done what Mom and Dad expected. He'd gotten his degree and moved directly into a high-paying executive position at an advertising agency.

Jordan was damn good at his job, but it didn't change the fact that his employer was an old-money family friend. Justin knew in the same situation, he wouldn't be able to shake the feeling that he'd gotten the job because of that connection. And now they were co-CEO's by inheritance.

Someday Justin planned to start his own business, build it from the ground up into a solid, respectable company like Granddad. But he planned to do it himself, without anyone else's help.

\*\*\*\*\*



Steaming coffee warmed Justin's hand through the thermos cup as he watched the sun climb toward the treetops. He'd arrived early enough to do a walk through inspection of the job site without prying eyes, but by six-thirty he'd returned to the Jeep. No sense raising anyone's suspicion if they discovered him nosing around.

Everything looked fine. In fact, yesterday the men had worked like a well-oiled machine and Marley Wade had been impressive in her command. His respect for her in that aspect had grown.

He grimaced. Except for the incident with her brother.

The moment the trailer door closed, Tom complained about Nate Wade being late. Apparently, it'd become a regular occurrence and none of them liked picking up the kid's slack. Even after Warren expressed concern for how hard Mark Wade's death had been on Nate, Chuck quickly pointed out that Marley hadn't let it affect her job performance.

Justin wasn't so sure. Letting her brother slide would only stir up trouble. Back in Canada, he'd have had to give the guy the boot after a couple warnings. A person could still grieve without being late for work all the time.

An old pickup drew his attention as it barreled into sight. Same as yesterday, Ms. Wade didn't waste time as she parked and sprinted for the trailer, this time wearing an odd color combination skirt and blouse. The colors were forgotten when he noticed her bare feet again. After what he'd observed yesterday, she didn't strike him as the type to commit safety violations.

He waited a full five minutes before approaching the trailer. The same muffled response answered his brisk knock. Out of curiosity, he tried the door.

Locked.

He realized with a foreign sense of

protectiveness he would've been angry if it hadn't been. Annoyance that he even cared had him tapping his fingers impatiently against his leg.

A couple of the men he'd met yesterday walked by, and he nodded in greeting. Leaning against the step handrail, he stuffed his hands in his pockets and took in the sunrise. Golden yellow outlined the few clouds, promising a good day. One could only hope it extended past the weather and offered a few answers.

Speaking of which... He frowned at the door, then his watch. Like a flash of lightning, her game registered and a corner of his mouth quirked. He'd employed the "make him wait" tactic a time or two when he wanted to stress who was boss to an arrogant or obnoxious employee.

Since he considered himself neither, her power play revealed she wasn't as secure in her position as she wanted everyone to believe. Interesting.

Finally the lock clicked and the door opened. Marley stood tall in front of him, at least five-nine, dressed in jeans and another modest tee shirt, work boots and tool belt. He squashed his smile at her *I'm-the-boss-here* face as she stepped aside so he could enter.

"Sorry about the wait."

She was not, but he knew it was all part of the process. "No problem."

He watched her close the door and then head over to the desk to stand behind it. Again, stressing she held a superior position. If only she knew. He sat down when she gestured to a chair, then held another smile when she remained standing.

"How did things go yesterday?"

"You tell me," he suggested with full confidence.

Her gaze narrowed. "Do you want full time?"

He bit back "*That's what I was hired for,*" and instead said, "Whatever you've got."

“Forty plus overtime if you want it. I assume you filled out all the paperwork at your interview, so here’s a time card. Turn it in Monday and you’ll get your check on Friday.”

He glanced briefly at the card she’d handed him. “Sounds good. Thank you.”

He looked up in time to see her wipe her palm across her thigh before extending it over the desk.

“Welcome to the team, Justin.”

This time he was ready for her firm grip. What got him was the sound of his name in her voice. Her husky tone grew sexier every time he heard her speak. Shaking off the unwelcome thought, he hightailed it to work.

\*\*\*\*

Thankful to exit the trailer after the past few hours, Marley paused on the step and surveyed the site bathed in late morning light. How she loved watching a building go up. Having been raised on a construction site, she knew she’d retire on one—as an architect, though, not the general contractor.

She noted with relief that Nate had arrived on time. With everything else she had to worry about today, she really hadn’t wanted to fire him. Especially after her last call to corporate had confirmed her worst suspicions.

Her father had seriously under-budgeted this project and they were currently operating in a wide margin of red. Just what she needed when she was set to meet with the new owners of Hunter Construction next week.

That’s what the fax had read earlier. *Owners*. Plural, just like Warren’s wife Bonnie had heard. She would finally find out who’d inherited the company, and she had five days to figure out a way to convince them she wasn’t incompetent. That meant keeping everything running smoothly and efficiently.

And that reminded her of Justin Blackman. She hadn't wanted to keep him. Wouldn't have if she hadn't seen how proficiently he worked and hoped it would balance the cost of his wages. He didn't wait to be told what to do; he took charge and got the job done. She'd even noticed him directing a couple of the guys on different occasions. With the aura of authority he exuded, no one even thought to question his instructions.

Maybe that's why she'd been so nervous this morning. Not because that jittery feeling returned to her stomach when she'd heard his knock, but because she didn't like someone else giving orders on her turf.

*Yeah, that's exactly the problem.*

She looked around again. Nate and Warren were off to the side, joking about something. Tom stood near the blueprint table with Chuck Hager, the job supervisor, and Andy Hyer, their electrician. Chuck was reviewing the building plans, but the other two just stood there.

The only real work being done was by none other than Matt Pearce, Justin, and Felipe Hernandez. Granted, they were all new to her team in the past couple weeks, and maybe trying to prove something, but the morning break had ended ten minutes ago.

She paused next to the bulldozer. It became apparent Matt and Felipe deferred to Justin and looked to him for direction. Justin frowned toward where the others stood idle before looking at his watch.

Suddenly, she felt like she wasn't doing her job. Her spine stiffened, and she started forward to say something. Justin spoke before she could.

"How about a few guys get on this wall over here, we need the corner braces secured," he called out.

Warren and Tom headed over right away, but Nate took his time. Marley pressed her lips together and decided she'd address everyone at lunch. She didn't plan on spelling out all her troubles, but she'd let them know they'd have to pick up the pace and stick to the schedule.

At the very least, it would be a start and then she could focus on finding some real solutions to save her career.

### Chapter 3

Marley shifted in her chair the next morning and watched through the coffee house window as Dale Blake exited his silver Bentley. For the first time, she noted his height and blond hair. Like Justin.

*Oh my God, Marley, this is getting out of hand. Enough already.*

She took a sip of coffee and focused on her reason for being there. Dale Blake had called her after her father died. She'd thought, as acting CEO of Hunter Construction, he simply wanted to extend his condolences. Instead, he'd revealed that he'd been a friend of her father's years ago. They'd had a falling out and though he'd attempted to mend the rift numerous times over the years, her father refused to speak with him.

She didn't doubt that. She'd loved her dad, but he'd been a hard man. Driven, cold, and certainly not forgiving—especially if he was off the wagon. He'd taught her everything he knew, but never once in all the years working by his side did she get the feeling that he forgave her for being a girl. No matter how hard she'd worked in his world. Over the years, Marley had never shaken the belief that she didn't measure up simply because of her sex.

She'd never understood. Still didn't now. Which was partly why she continued to meet with his estranged friend of the past. Maybe she'd figure out what had made her father the way he'd been.

So far, she hadn't learned much, other than she liked Mr. Blake. For being the CEO of a major

construction company, he was surprisingly...normal. At first she thought it was a bit strange, meeting him like this, but he was warm and sincere, and showed genuine interest in her goals and dreams.

At his request, she'd brought in her portfolio of business designs. One in particular had caught his attention; a drawing she'd done for a job she'd heard through the grapevine would be up for bid next week. He'd taken her work back to his office to study. Despite his warning he couldn't promise anything, this morning she hoped he'd offer the internship she needed with Hunter Construction. It would be just the beginning to get her and Nate started on their future.

"Good morning, Marley," Dale said as he sat down with his coffee and a muffin.

*See that? Blue eyes. Not like Justin at all. Justin's are hazel.*

"You look...nice...today," Dale added.

She gave Justin's image a mental shove and smiled at Dale. "Thank you."

Doubt had lingered over the black and white checked suit she'd found on the clearance rack, but the price had been right. Never comfortable picking out clothes other than jeans and tee shirts, she felt stupid asking impeccably dressed saleswomen for help. No matter how often she rationalized it was their job, she couldn't shake the fear that they'd realize how clueless she was when it came to fashion and laugh at her. Dale's compliment eased her deep-rooted insecurity.

"Would you like something besides coffee this morning?" he asked.

"No, thank you. Nate and I usually eat breakfast together before he leaves for class and I go to work."

In the middle of unwrapping his muffin, Dale's fingers stilled at the mention of her brother. "How's Nate been?"

She wondered at the tension in his question and tensed herself. Had someone called corporate about Nate's habitual tardiness? She hoped not. Pasting a smile on her face, she said, "He's good. I'm sorry he hasn't had time to join us yet, but with his classes and—"

"Don't worry about it," Dale murmured. "Nate and I will meet when the time is right."

Something in his tone sent a shiver of unease down her spine.

"I looked over your design."

Her gaze met his. He smiled, his blue eyes warm and interested. She shrugged away the disquieting sensation and listened to his words.

"I've decided to present it to the board this week, and if the internship is approved, we'll pull you from your current job to focus on the Jenkins project."

Mixed feelings assaulted her jumpy nerves. She didn't want to leave the Forrester site without resolving the budget issues, but at the same time she wanted to leap from her seat and hug Dale for the internship.

She allowed a hesitant smile. "That would be great. I can't tell you what all your help means to me."

He stared at her, and his eyes took on a far-away look. "You remind me so much of your mother when you smile."

Marley blinked in surprise. "You knew her?" He'd never mentioned it before.

Dale nodded. "Annette was beautiful. I met her right after you were born, when I returned from Harvard."

"Dad never talked about her," Marley said quietly.

Dale straightened, cleared his throat. "Your father loved her very much. He was devastated when she was killed."



Her father had actually loved someone? She didn't remember that time, having been only three when her mother was killed during a home robbery. Marley had vague, fuzzy memories of someone warm and kind, of feeling loved, then nothing. No mother, a man she called Daddy and couldn't please no matter how hard she tried, and a revolving door of babysitters.

It didn't take long to recognize the babysitters were actually her father's girlfriends and she and Nate were nuisances they tolerated until they figured out her dad was only using them.

Old memories of rejection swelled and threatened to beat down the fortress she'd constructed around her self-confidence.

"Oh, look at the time," she exclaimed.

Dale reached over and covered her hand with his. "I'm sorry I brought up bad memories."

"You didn't. I don't remember her, really." His touch made her uncomfortable in a way she didn't understand and she pulled away to stand up. "I have to go or I'll be late."

"Need me to write you an excuse?" Dale asked with a joking smile.

She couldn't hold back a grin, and felt her confidence rebound. She wasn't that insecure little girl anymore. "I'll be fine if I leave now." *And speed.*

"Why don't we meet again tomorrow? Just in case I have any final questions before presenting your design."

She suddenly felt bad for running out. He'd been nothing but kind to her. "Tomorrow would be fine. Thank you, for everything."

"Don't worry about it. I'm happy to help. It makes me feel better to know Mark's children are taken care of."

With a final smile, she hurried from the shop as fast as she could manage in her heels. The moment

she shut the door of her truck, she kicked the damn things off. Some day she'd have to learn to walk in them, but right now she hated how they left her feeling unsteady and off balance.

She frowned as she drove from the parking lot, thinking of the meeting with Dale. The whole morning had been odd. Good from the aspect that her internship looked very promising, but the conversation about her parents left her feeling like her high-heeled shoes.

\*\*\*\*

Hammer in hand by the west wall, Justin looked up when he heard Marley's truck, then consulted his watch. She had one minute before she was officially late. He'd have to take the time to figure out where the hell she went in the mornings. Like tomorrow.

He watched her exit the truck, curious about...yep, barefoot again. But what was she wearing today? Black and white checkers?

"Hey, Justin," Chuck Hager called. "Come tell me what you make of these measurements."

He shifted his attention back to the job. Her obvious lack of fashion sense was no business of his.

When Marley approached in her work clothes five minutes later, Chuck had left to answer a question for Warren, and Justin compared his field measure to the numbers on the blueprints.

"Something's not right here." Annoyance that it hadn't been caught earlier echoed in his tone. "Who authorized these plans?"

"My father did. What's the problem?"

He hesitated at the mention of her deceased father, then pointed to the difference in measurements. "These rafters are short by two inches. It'll throw off the entire roof."

Standing close enough that their arms brushed, she scrutinized the blueprints. She'd tied her hair back in the usual ponytail, but a few silky-looking

strands had escaped and a light wind blew them across her face. The urge to tuck them behind her ear was as unwelcome as it was sudden.

"Are you sure your field measure is correct?" Her brow creased as she tucked the hair back. "I double checked the measurements myself."

His irritation spiked at her doubt. "I suggest you triple check them."

She drew herself up straight as a board. "I suggest you go back to what you're supposed to be doing and quit doing my job."

Her quiet order jolted him. Shit. He'd forgotten himself. Lips pressed together in a tight seam, he turned and strode across the plywood floor of the house. Over the next ten minutes, Justin did *his* job, careful to avoid watching her re-measure.

Would he have to reveal his identity and fire her? Given the circumstances of the company right now, and the way he'd been distracted by her presence over the past couple days, not to mention Granddad, it might be for the best.

"You were right."

Justin spun around. Loud enough for everyone in the general vicinity to hear it over the noise of the boom truck, Marley's husky admission came as a complete surprise. She met his gaze without flinching, even though he read in her eyes how much she hated being wrong.

"The rafters were ordered off previous blueprints, before we adjusted for the extra insulation the owner insisted we put on the outside wall."

A rookie mistake, even if it was an honest one. Unfortunately, because of the size of the house, it would now cost Hunter Construction thousands of dollars in new lumber.

Marley turned away as the boom began to lower a rafter for a different section of the roof. Justin

glanced up the ladder where Nate used a rope to guide it into place, then his gaze returned to her retreating back.

"You realize you'll need to reorder the entire set of rafters for that section," he called.

She spun around. "I'm not a complete idiot. I'll have you know—"

A snap reverberated in the air and Justin saw the boom arm jerk. The ominous sound of the steel cable slipping unrestrained through the iron hook reached his ears as the rafter fell straight toward Marley.

He lunged forward. Hooked an arm around her waist and dove to the side. The crack of splintering wood accompanied their bone-jarring impact with the ground. Justin lay dazed for a moment, until Marley's soft curves registered beneath him. No blinding pain—and he was still breathing. So was she.

Or at least she tried to. His weight on the landing had knocked the wind out of her. Voices surrounded them and hands grabbed his arms. He shook them off, concentrating on shifting his weight from Marley. She stared up at him with wide eyes as she sucked oxygen into her lungs.

"You okay?" His gruff voice barely rose above a whisper.

She nodded, but her lashes drifted shut.

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

Her arms and legs moved. "I'm okay." The unsteady words preceeded another deep breath. She blinked a few times and looked at the men surrounding them. Dismay flooded her expression. "I need to get up."

A slight tremor shook her body. Knowing she'd need a moment to compose herself, he cautioned, "Easy. Take your time."

Furious fire sparked in her green eyes. "Let me

up," she demanded.

Okay, then, screw composure. He took hold of her hand and elbow and hauled her to her feet. She swayed a bit with his release, and her hand reached to steady herself, making contact with his bare arm. A second later, she snatched it away and stiffened her spine.

Nate pushed through the others and grabbed her close. "Thank God, Mar."

"I'm fine, Nate."

"You didn't see what I saw." He held her at arm's length. "If he'd been a split second slower..."

The care and concern in Nate's expression amazed Justin. So far he'd seen the guy give his sister nothing but grief.

Chuck clapped Justin on the shoulder. "You okay, man? I can't believe how fast you moved."

That drew some of the attention off Marley, but Justin didn't want the recognition of what he'd done. Either one of them could've been killed. Just the thought of it turned his stomach. Memory of another accident threatened to surface, but he forced it away and focused on the present.

"Someone want to tell me what the hell happened?" Justin swept a furious gaze across the faces surrounding them. He stopped on Warren. As the operator of the boom truck, Warren's job included maintaining the equipment according to safety regulations.

"The cable snapped," Tom offered into the silence.

"Obviously," Justin bit out. Without looking away from Warren, whose face had turned as red as his hair, he asked, "When's the last time you checked it?"

Before Warren could defend himself, Marley's clipped voice resonated over the group. "I'll take care of this."

Justin's gaze swung to hers. Her expression dared him to say more. Though it went against everything in him, he ground his molars together and deferred to her authority. Why the hell wasn't she demanding answers?

"Fifteen minute break, guys," Marley said. "Then we've got a lot of equipment to check and even more work to make up."

As the others drifted away, Justin took a few steps back and dropped his butt onto a wooden sawhorse. Marley had to walk past the twisted wreckage of the rafter to reach her trailer. Her step faltered. Halted. She glanced back to where she'd been standing and he saw a shudder ripple across her shoulders. Then her chin lifted, her expression hardened, and she headed straight for the trailer.

Justin leaned forward to pick up her hardhat and rested it on his knee. She was so concerned that everyone saw her as the tough, in-charge boss, but she'd almost been killed. If it had been him, he'd want to know what happened with that cable.

He surged to his feet. Hell, it *had* been him, too.

While making his way over to the cable, something else struck him as odd. They'd all taken their break as she'd suggested. Weren't any of them the least bit concerned about this incident? Was there more to the accident than met the eye?

Warren joined him a moment later.

"I meant to check the cable yesterday," Warren admitted in a low, guilt-ridden voice.

The ends in his hand appeared frayed, not cut. The thought that someone would deliberately tamper with the cable chilled his blood, but information his brother had provided revealed this wasn't the first accident to happen on this job site, and he couldn't ignore the possibility. Question was, if it wasn't an accident, who was out for who?

Chuck joined them. Warren looked like he might

be sick, and over the next fifteen minutes, Justin became convinced it was nothing more than an accident. His lips twisted. How he hated that word. It could cover up so much. Carelessness. Stupidity. Ignorance.

*Let it go, man. All you can do now is live with it.*

And educate these guys so they didn't end up like him.

Everyone returned to work, and by the time the busted wood had been cleared, things returned to normal.

Except Marley had yet to emerge from the trailer.

## Chapter 4

Her damn knees still shook so bad she didn't think she could stand. How could she go out there to do her job when she was a complete mess? Weakness was not an option right now.

The door creaked open.

Thankful her back faced the door, she said, "I'll be right out."

The moment she heard the creak and click, she released a sigh of relief. No one could see her like this. Men didn't fall apart like a baby; there was no reason she should.

"Marley?"

She jumped almost as high as her pulse spiked. She shot to her feet and glared at Justin across the desk. "Don't you *ever* listen?"

"I wanted to make sure you were okay."

The soft-voiced concern threatened her tenuous composure. "I told you I was fine. I just had some things to work on in here." Like her nerves.

His gaze dropped to the cleared surface of the desk.

"I don't know who you think you are," she said abruptly. "I mean, I only hired you because you did a good job that first day. But ever since then you've been walking around here like you own the place."

He moved forward. She spoke even faster. "You give orders to the guys and they listen to you. I don't understand it. It's like you're trying to do my job. But it's my job, not yours. I'm perfectly qualified and competent to do it."

God, she couldn't stop talking. And she didn't



even recognize her own voice anymore.

He stepped around to her side of the desk.

"And just because you're good at it doesn't mean you're any better at it than I am. You—"

Her sentence squeaked to a halt when he put his hands on her trembling shoulders and drew her forward. Instinctively, she raised her hands between them. He didn't say a single word. All he did was wrap his arms around her and hold her against his solid chest.

She held her breath and remained stiff, but then she had to breathe. Slowly she became aware of the steady beat of his heart, the warmth of his embrace, the heady male scent of him. The tension in her shoulders eased. Somehow, he made her feel safe and protected. Cherished even. Stupid, she knew, since she'd only met him a few days ago, but it didn't change the feeling. No one had ever held her like this before.

Not even her dad the day she'd fallen off a ladder and broken her arm on her sixth birthday.

Tears overflowed her bottom lashes. She squeezed her eyes tight. The harder she fought them, the faster they fell. A single sob escaped. Justin's arms tightened and his hand pressed her head to his shoulder. She didn't resist even though moisture soon dampened his tee shirt.

It didn't last long; she wouldn't let it. After a steadying breath, she pulled her arms from where they'd ended up wrapped around his lean, solid waist. She was afraid to look up.

His hand lifted to her cheek and his thumb skimmed the moist skin. "It's okay to be shook up, Marley. Nobody's invincible. No one expects you to be."

"I expect me to be." She raised her hands to wipe her face, pushing his away in the process.

"It's too much."

She finally looked at him. "If the men out there see any sign of weakness from me, all their respect will be gone." She snapped her fingers. "Just like that. Just like any you might have had is, I'm sure."

"That's not true."

"Yeah, sure." She would've turned away, but he caught her arm.

"There's not many people I respect more than I've come to respect you in the past few days."

She met his gaze and saw the truth of his words. The jittery feeling that had taken up residence in her stomach since the day she met him went on full alert. Only now she couldn't fool herself that it was because of the job. It was all him.

She lowered her lashes to break eye contact. "Thank you."

His mouth caught her attention as one corner lifted in the beginning of a smile. It was a damn fine mouth to go along with his damn fine body. How would it feel on hers? She'd only been kissed a handful of times. Dating had never been important to her, and she'd never been curious. Until now.

He took a step closer. She realized she'd been staring at his mouth and jerked her attention up. His expression changed. He looked...intentful. Was that even a word? She wasn't so sure—she'd have to look it up some—oh, hell! Now she was babbling in her mind.

"Something about you got my attention from the moment we met."

That struck her as funny. "Would that have been my bra?"

Justin grinned. "There was that. But it was only half as intriguing as the woman wearing it."

She rolled her eyes to combat the unfamiliar thrill his words evoked.

He lifted a hand to rest on her shoulder. Gave a gentle squeeze. "Everything okay now?"

She nodded as his thumb skimmed the pulse at the base of her throat. When his touch returned to rest over the throbbing point, she felt a steady increase and knew he did too.

*Curiosity killed the cat, Marley.*

Cats have nine lives.

His head lowered toward hers. His gaze dropped to her mouth. The first brush of his warm lips against hers made her sway closer. She closed her eyes and lifted her chin for a better connection. When she braced one hand on his chest for support, she was shocked to feel his heart thundering beneath her palm.

His other arm slid over her hip and around her waist to pull her against him. The nerve endings in her entire body came alive, overwhelming her with unfamiliar sensations. She suddenly felt as if she'd had one too many beers on a sweltering summer night.

Then his mouth opened on hers. His hot, wet tongue slid along the seam of her lips before pushing through to her teeth. It startled her. It excited her.

Okay, so her handful of kisses had been back in the fifth grade, when a half-second peck on the lips during spin the bottle was a major deal.

*This was a major deal!*

*No, Marley, kissing an employee is a major deal.*

She jerked her head away and pushed against his chest with both hands. He let go, allowing her to take a quick step back to put some space between them. She had no idea what to say and while trying to come up with something, she raised a hand to her lips. They felt as if they'd been shot with a jolt of electricity.

Realizing he watched her, she dropped her hand to rest on the back of the desk chair.

*Buck up, Marley. You didn't get this far by acting like a woman.*

“I think it’s time you get back to work.”

Justin paused at her cool, collected tone. The adrenaline coursing through his veins was similar to the rush he got when he used to rock climb with his brother. Back when he didn’t know the true meaning of accidents and what they could do to your life.

He wanted to stay, wanted to pull her against him for another taste to wipe away everything else.

But she was right. He needed to leave. Before he did something even more idiotic than the boss kissing his employee. She might not know about that, but he did. At least she’d had the sense to stop it. He strode across the trailer and reached for the doorknob.

“My father was killed the day he put in the lumber order for the rafters.”

His fingers tightened on the metal in his palm.

“I’m not trying to make excuses,” she continued. “I should’ve remembered to call in the new measurements. I just want you to know, under normal circumstances I’d never have made such a rookie mistake.”

*Rookie mistake.* His exact thought from earlier. Unnerved, he faced her and instantly wished he hadn’t. Moisture brightened her eyes again, only this time she contained the tears.

“It’s an honest mistake, Marley, anyone could’ve made it. Don’t beat yourself up.” He cringed inside. He’d been ready to fire her for it—still might have to.

She shook her head. “Except now it’s going to drain more money out of my already strained budget.”

The moment the words were out, Justin saw she hadn’t meant to reveal so much. Her mouth thinned with annoyance.

“I just wanted to, well, I guess I’d like you to know that I—”

A knock at the door cut her off, and Justin swung it open at her silent indication. Chuck pulled up short when he saw Justin. "Wondered where you'd gotten to." He glanced at Marley. "Am I interrupting?"

"We're finished."

Justin gave a curt nod and stepped outside.

"Justin."

He caught the doorjamb and leaned back in. "Yeah?"

"Thank you. For earlier and for, um, everything."

His gaze locked with hers. He recognized the thank you was for the rafter—and the rest? Well, the rest was for something else. The color in her cheeks told him that.

He smiled briefly. "Anytime," he said, telling himself he only referred to saving her life.

\*\*\*\*\*

Justin hit the speed dial for Jordan's cell phone as he shifted his Jeep into second and continued the winding drive down the mountain roads into Boulder.

Jordan answered on the third ring. "Yeah, what's up?"

"I'm not going to make it tonight." He made sure to speak loud enough for his words to carry to the hands-free set and be heard over the sound of his cranky old engine. "We had quite the day out here and I have some things to take care of."

"No problem, that frees me up for something tonight, too."

Justin gave a snort of laughter. "Brunette or blonde?"

"Neither, idiot. I work, too."

Justin's gaze shifted from the road to the phone, as if he could see Jordan through it. Sore subject all of a sudden? What the hell was that about? "Just a

joke, man, just a joke.”

“Sorry. This financial stuff is something else. You’ve got it easy.”

“Yeah? I almost got killed by a half ton of falling lumber today. I win.”

“What the hell happened?”

“Faulty cable.” Justin glanced in the rearview mirror. “At least I hope that’s all it was.”

“Are you kidding me? If there’s a chance you could be killed out there, I don’t think—”

“Jordan, accidents happen all the time on job sites. I run the same risks every day in Toronto.”

“Bullshit. When’s the last time you had an accident on one of your sites?”

Justin’s hands tightened on the wheel. Of course, Jordan didn’t know. No one knew the real truth except him and Granddad. And Granddad was dead now. He didn’t want to think about it—about his own rookie mistake that had cost Greg Johnson his life almost ten years ago.

It was the reason why, as the boss on his own sites, he put safety above all else. “Look, I didn’t call to talk about this. You still at the office?”

“Yeah, why?”

“I need you to look up Marley Wade’s home address for me.”

There was a moment of silence. “Why do you want your boss’s home address?”

“Technically, I’m her boss.”

“Doesn’t answer my question.”

“She runs in minutes before work, and she’s always wearing a business suit that she immediately changes out of.” Ugly ones and no shoes. “Since she’s the only one who currently matches the note in Granddad’s hand, I’m going to follow her in the morning and see what’s up.”

“Good idea. I’ll text you the address.”

“Thanks. One more thing.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll need your car—she knows my Jeep.”

\*\*\*\*

Justin drove past the small cabin-like log house at 621 Ridge Road to figure out where he could park unseen, then flipped Jordan’s Lexus around and settled in. It was almost six a.m. and the sun’s rays reflected in his rearview mirror as it began its daily climb.

Marley’s truck sat in the drive, Nate’s right alongside it.

The door opened as he poured his first cup of coffee from his thermos. Marley exited the house with a briefcase in one hand and a pair of shoes in the other. Even as he pulled his baseball cap lower over his face, his brows rose at her outfit.

Her choice of clothes didn’t come close to doing the body underneath justice. A lime-green skirt hung on her hips and the plain white blouse she’d paired it with was shapeless. Man, why did she hide underneath such unflattering clothes? In the right curve-hugging-cut-down-to-there dress, she’d stop traffic.

She backed out of her driveway and Justin swore when she almost collided with a passing car. The driver laid on the horn, and Marley slammed on her brakes, her head jerking from the sudden stop. After a guilty, apologetic wave to her near-victim, he saw her double-check the road before speeding off.

Justin pulled out behind her, but kept his distance. She was an impatient driver, inching forward at each intersection, her brake lights flashing like a radio tower warning light, until the signal turned green. Then she shot on to the next one, weaving in and out of traffic.

He began to worry he’d lose her when she made a quick right turn into the parking lot of a local coffee shop not far from Hunter Construction’s office

headquarters.

He was familiar with the shop, having had coffee with his Granddad at the corner table many times growing up. He felt a pang of grief knowing the man who'd inspired him to make it on his own would never sit there again. He owed it to his Granddad to find out what really happened and save the company he'd worked so hard to build. Hunter Construction was a legend that needed to live on.

He directed his attention back to Marley as her legs swung from the truck. She slipped on a pair of high-heeled shoes before touching ground on the sidewalk. Used to seeing her stride confidently across the job site in her steel-toed work boots, her slower steps surprised him.

Through the glass windows, he watched her order, and then cross the shop to sit at a table in the corner. She must be meeting someone. With her first sip of coffee, Justin saw it was too hot by the way she pulled the cup away and immediately raised her fingers to her lips. He sipped from the thermos cup and watched her fidget with her plastic ware. Then she ripped a napkin into little pieces while glancing at her watch every fifteen seconds.

Marley Girl was expecting someone, all right, and she was damn nervous about it. Interview for a new job? Not dressed like that, he hoped. A married lover, perhaps? Not dressed like that, either. Besides, his gut told him she wasn't the type; respect was too important to her.

More likely she was meeting a friend, or maybe a boyfriend she was about to break up with. Or maybe a *new* guy she really liked. He frowned at that possibility and then told himself he didn't care.

A silver Bentley glided behind the Lexus and eased into a parking space a few cars down. Justin's frown deepened.

"Well, hello, Dad," he whispered into the silence



of the vehicle. "What are you doing here this early in the morning?"

He sat up straighter in the car as his father entered the shop, bought a coffee and a muffin, and walked directly toward Marley's table.

"Oh no you don't," Justin warned.

Oh, yes he did. Worse, Marley gave his father a wide, welcoming smile. As if she knew him. As if she were happy to see him. When he sat, his father covered her hand with his and let it linger. Justin noted she didn't pull away until she took a sip of coffee a moment later.

He felt ready to explode. How dare she!

Whoa...no, how dare *he*!

That's why he was angry, because his father was having an affair. He reached for his cell, then remembered he'd stuck it in his pocket when he'd switched vehicles with Jordan. He lifted his hips to dig into his jeans and promptly spilled coffee in his crotch.

"Shit!" He made a frantic grab for the cup and held it up. More liquid dripped onto his leg as he reached over into the glove box for some napkins. He came up empty.

Curses filled the car. Justin opened the door and dumped what was left in his cup onto the asphalt. Then he stripped off his sweatshirt and used it to soak up what he could of the drenched material between his legs and under his ass.

Muttering all the while, he retrieved his phone and punched the speed dial for Jordan's number.

His brother answered on the fifth ring. "Yeah."

"I want her fired."

## Chapter 5

“What? Who? What time is it?”

“Marley Wade,” Justin bit out. “I want her gone. She’s done for, you hear me?”

“The woman I danced with at the club last night heard you,” Jordan groaned.

Justin made a sound of disgust. “You’re as bad as Dad.”

“Wait a minute, those are fighting words and at...*six twenty-three*?” The sound of rustling sheets accompanied his brother’s annoyed voice. “Justin, you don’t call people at six twenty-three in the morning. They’re still sleeping.”

“Well get your ass up.”

“Hey, you want to crow with the roosters, be my guest. But leave me out of it.”

“She’s having an affair.”

“So? I don’t care. Why do you?”

“With Dad.”

“*What?*”

“She’s sleeping with Dad! You know, what you did with the chick from the club last night?”

“I didn’t sleep with anyone last night,” Jordan growled. “I meant you were hollering so damn loud that she probably heard you all the way across town.”

Justin clamped his jaw tight to keep his anger in check.

The sound of a drawer slamming sounded through the phone. “What’d you do, follow them to some hotel?”

“No, I’m at that coffee shop down on Cypress.”

"Did you see them kissing?"

"No."

"Well, what *are* they doing?"

"Having coffee, but—"

"Wait. Are you telling me you've deduced this whole affair from a simple cup of java?" Jordan asked.

"No, I—" Justin paused. Damn it. He kinda had.

"You know, she does work for us. Did it ever occur to you that they could be meeting for business?"

Justin thought about that angle and realized it certainly made more sense. Relief flowed through him. Until something else occurred to him and his anger spiked all over again. "What if they're working together? What if Dad's up to something? He was really pissed off at the reading of Granddad's will."

He'd been angry enough that he'd made a complete fool of himself. That was something Dale Blake the Third never did. Appearances were everything to the entire Blake family. Yet when the lawyer had read the will, Dale had ranted and raved about the old bastard getting his revenge. Then he'd looked at their mother and said in a furious voice, "*I never said a single word, Diana. And you know I could have.*"

"*Not here,*" their mother had snapped.

"Hmmm," Jordan said, bringing Justin back to the present. "Now that theory doesn't sound so farfetched."

"Damn right it doesn't. Either way, she's gone. Type up the paperwork today and have it delivered to her house tomorrow."

"Me?" Jordan asked in surprise.

"Yes, you. Bonnie's married to one of the guys on Marley's team. She's kept quiet about us so far, but I don't want to take any chances."

"Tomorrow's Saturday."

"I know. I'll clean out her office after work so she'll have no reason to return to the site. Right about now, I don't trust Dad any more than he trusted Granddad, and if Marley's working with him, I certainly don't trust her either."

\*\*\*\*\*

Justin barely had time to switch vehicles at Jordan's apartment again before rushing to work. He wished he could change his stained jeans, and Jordan was going to freak over the coffee stain on the seat of his Lexus, but in the grand scheme of things, they both had more important things to worry about.

*Marley and his dad.* He still couldn't believe it. He pounded his fist on the steering wheel as he turned onto the highway. But there was more than his anger over them conspiring together. He just couldn't define it.

He shifted into first as he pulled into the job site, no closer to figuring out what bothered him most than when he'd first seen them together. He slammed his door closed when he saw Marley exit her trailer in her work clothes. On time, damn her.

Through the morning, after he'd snarled at a few of his co-workers, everyone began to avoid him, even Marley. Fine with him. She was the last person he wanted to talk to. It didn't help that every time he glanced in her direction he thought about that kiss in the trailer yesterday, remembered her refreshing, perfume-free scent and the feel of her soft lips under his, instead of picturing her at the shop with his dad.

By eleven-thirty, he decided the best course of action was to stop looking at her. Easier said than done as Nate's blue pickup pulled onto the lot and Marley marched past where Justin and Chuck reviewed the blueprints.

"I sure don't envy her position right now," Chuck muttered.

Justin watched Marley catch Nate's arm before he made it past the bumper of his truck. "How is it she's the boss and not you?" he asked the older man without taking his eyes off the unfolding action.

From the corner of his eye he saw Chuck look at him before answering. "Marley's been with Hunter longer than any of us."

That surprised Justin. "How long have you worked here?"

"Almost ten years."

Ten years? Marley didn't look to be a day over twenty-five. "Surely your experience made you more qualified."

"All I've got is a high school diploma," Chuck stated matter-of-factly. "Marley started working with her Dad when she was sixteen, worked her way through college and graduated just last month with a degree in business and a Master's in architecture."

Justin did the math and decided she had to be twenty-six or twenty-seven. He also knew she had to have worked hard to get to where she was today, especially in a male-dominated field. He wondered if she'd been favored as the former general contractor's daughter, but quickly discarded the thought. The men gave her too much respect for that.

Guilt rushed forward for having ordered her termination, but he tamped it down. Anything she was up to with his father didn't deserve sympathy. So what if he'd grown to like her over the past couple days? Now he viewed her in an entirely different light. A certain measure of his respect still remained, but it was altered now. Cheapened.

That's when it hit him, what he couldn't put his finger on earlier. He was disappointed in her for having anything to do with his father...and, damn it, he was disappointed in the fact that he wouldn't get to kiss her again.

The fact that he still wanted to pissed him off.

\*\*\*\*

If everyone weren't watching right now, Marley would've smacked Nate upside the head the way her father used to when he did something stupid. The way he'd been acting lately, though, she wouldn't put it past Nate to turn around and deck her.

She forced the confrontation at the bumper of his truck. "I warned you."

"You're kidding, right?"

She shook her head but kept her gaze steady.

"Don't do this, Mar. You need me and you know it."

She did need him, but if she didn't set a precedent, her job would be on the line. Most of the guys were young, with the exception of Chuck. This was her test to see how she could handle being the boss, and damned if she'd fail because Nate thought he could play the family card.

"I'll give you a good recommendation, but other than—"

He jammed the heel of his hand against the side of his truck, making her flinch.

"Screw your recommendation, Mar, and screw you."

She cringed as he yanked the door of his truck open. "Nate—"

He didn't even look at her as he slammed the door shut and punched the truck into gear. Marley jumped out of the way and watched him speed away, leaving her in a billowing cloud of dust.

She wanted to cry. She never cried, yet for the second time in as many days she felt tears sting her eyes. She refused to let them fall as she returned to the framed wall where she'd been working. Nate had made his own bed. She'd given him more warnings than she could count.

She couldn't help but glance at Justin on her way past, but he didn't meet her gaze. She knew

why, too. He hadn't spoken to her, or even looked at her since he'd kissed her. She knew regret when she saw it. He was making sure she didn't get any foolish notions that it'd happen again.

Well, the conceited jerk didn't know anything. If he did, he'd know she didn't want him to kiss her again. She wanted things back the way they'd been before he'd turned her world upside down with his dominating, opinionated, natural aura of authority that made the others listen without question.

He certainly wasn't like anyone she'd worked with before. He acted like a boss, not an employee. *Like Dad*. In that one way, Justin reminded her of him.

And now, that damn kiss had changed her way of thinking about Justin. She found herself wondering about him at the oddest moments. What he liked and disliked, where he lived, if he had a sense of humor—though thus far she wasn't holding her breath on that one.

She stopped dead in her tracks. What was she doing? This wasn't her; she didn't spend time thinking about a guy who so obviously didn't want anything to do with her. She didn't spend time thinking about men, period! Unless it was the brother she'd just fired.

She forced Justin and Nate from her mind and concentrated on work. By the time five o'clock rolled around, she was relatively satisfied with her success and felt more like herself again.

"Hey, Marley," Tom hollered from his truck as she reached for the door of the trailer. "We're stopping at Joe's for a beer, you comin'?"

Heaven help her, she looked right at Justin. Thank God his head had already disappeared into his Jeep. Was he going? She hoped...not. Repeat, *not*. Because not only could she actually use a drink right now, but after what'd happened, and Tom's

friendly invite, she couldn't say no. For appearances sake, one beer wouldn't hurt anything.

That was the one way she wasn't like her father.

\*\*\*\*

Marley walked into the bar and saw Tom and Warren right away. She groaned at the sight of Warren's wife, Bonnie, and another woman who sat with them. A cute, petite blonde with curls, Bonnie was the exact opposite of her equally petite, brunette friend, whose long, straight hair perfectly complimented her olive skin and exotic eyes. They were both dressed in what Marley would guess to be the latest fashion. Then again, since she never paid attention to fashion, she really couldn't say for sure.

Bonnie was very nice, and maybe so was her friend, but next to the two of them Marley felt like a drab giraffe. She didn't need this. The thought of having to endure 'girl-talk' made her head hurt. No one had spotted her yet, so she turned around to leave.

And ran smack into Justin.

"Whoa." He reached out and steadied her, then let go. "Leaving already?"

"I—um—I was looking for you...guys." She'd just noticed Chuck behind Justin.

Justin's brows rose. Yeah, the excuse had come out a bit weak, but thankfully he didn't call her on it.

"You found us." Chuck said with an oblivious grin. Marley focused her attention on him. At least he was smiling.

"What are you drinking?" she asked. "I've got the first round."

"Whatever's on tap, Mar, thanks." Chuck stepped past them as he spotted the others.

Justin hadn't answered yet. She looked back to find him watching her. She cleared her throat and straightened her spine. "What would you like?"



A subtle change in the color of his hazel eyes, a shifting of gold to brown, made her heart pound.

"Beer's fine."

"Great, I'll be right back."

Marley hurried to the bar and ordered three beers and a second round for the rest of the group. The bartender promised he'd bring them over, and she reluctantly made her way to the table.

Confusion turned her stomach. Justin had avoided her since the kiss, but just a moment ago, she'd gotten the strangest feeling from him. He'd looked kind of intentful again. Worse, she had no clue how to act, or what to say, and felt dumber than a box of rocks. For the first time ever, she almost wished she knew how to be a girl.

Almost.

At the table, Bonnie introduced her friend, Isabel, who'd already captured Tom and Felipe's attention. And no wonder, Marley thought with disgust as she eyed the woman's skin-tight, barely-there top and low-rise jeans that exposed her flat stomach and navel ring.

After a few minutes, though, she had to concede Isabel was as nice as Bonnie. Unfortunately, Marley didn't have much to contribute to their conversation about last Saturday's evening at Club 9, so instead she joined the heated discussion of the virtues of various Bronco draft picks and whether or not the NFL team would make it to the playoffs this year.

She ignored the fact that Justin remained silent. It was no concern of hers if he wasn't having a good time—she hadn't even wanted him to show up. She didn't care how his day had gone and certainly didn't want to ask about the large dark stain she'd noticed on the front of his jeans when he first arrived at the job site that morning.

When Chuck ordered a second round of drinks, Marley decided one more wouldn't hurt. But first she

needed a trip to the bathroom.

She exited the stall as Bonnie and Isabel walked in, and groaned under her breath.

"Hi, Marley." Bonnie's perky voice echoed in the relative quiet of the restroom.

Marley offered a stiff smile on her way to the sink to wash, wishing they'd go into the stalls so she could escape. Instead they parked themselves in front of the mirror and started refreshing their make-up, chatting non-stop.

"Justin's pretty hot," Isabel commented as she leaned close to apply her lipstick. Marley glanced up at the woman's reflection in the mirror and was surprised to see the woman watching her. After their gazes met for a brief second, Isabel redirected hers to the image of her lips. She pursed them as she capped her lipstick.

"He sure is," Bonnie agreed. She held her mascara and leaned her butt against the sink as Marley shut off the water and reached for a paper towel.

"You know, Marley, with your coloring, this shade would look awesome on you."

Marley regarded the tube of lipstick Isabel held out as if it were a live electrical wire.

"Give it a try," Bonnie urged.

Their expectant expressions started a flutter of anxiety in Marley's chest. The same feeling she got when picking out dress clothes with a sales woman hovering nearby. Hoping she didn't look clueless, she took the lipstick and turned toward the mirror.

Having watched Isabel a moment ago, she applied it with a minimum of insecurity, then stared at herself. Her lips looked bigger—fuller. Was that a good thing?

"Here, blot it." Bonnie handed her a tissue. "You were right, Isabel, it looks great. Now for mascara."

Before Marley could protest, Bonnie lifted her

hand and the wand came straight at her eye.

She leaned back in alarm. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Just a little to frame your eyes. God, I'd kill for that color."

Marley felt Isabel's hands working the tie from her hair, then a brush being pulled through the thick length that fell halfway down her back.

"Natural curls," Isabel lamented. "You're so lucky."

Marley grimaced. She'd always cursed her hair. Thick as could be, but so fine and slippery, stray strands were forever escaping anything she confined it with. If it weren't easier to just pull it back in a ponytail or tie it in a knot, she'd have cut it all off years ago.

Bonnie undid the top two buttons of Marley's work shirt, then untucked it from her jeans. She undid a few bottom buttons before tying the tail ends at her waist. When Marley saw the bare skin of her stomach, she finally stepped back out of reach. Isabel stared at her and Marley wondered if she'd sprouted horns. Her chest tightened.

"I can't wait to see his face," Isabel said.

Bonnie nodded. "Me neither. Marley, you've got to let us go ahead of you so we can watch."

"Who's face?" she asked, facing the mirror.

Her reflection stared back with amazement. She looked like one of those women she always felt so dowdy around. How was that possible with just a little bit of make-up?

She opened her mouth to repeat her question, then realized Bonnie and Isabel were on their way out. Oh, shit. She didn't want to walk up to the table like this all by herself. She hurried after them, nervously tugging the knotted tails of her shirt lower.

## Chapter 6

Justin lifted his beer, but the glass never made it to his lips. Bonnie and Isabel had just rejoined them, and right behind was—

*Marley?*

Damn. He'd been right, only she didn't need a dress. And instead of traffic, she'd stopped conversation. Dead silence reigned around the table as the men stared at her.

Her chestnut hair flowed freely over her shoulders and down her back. Overhead lights caught blonde highlights lightened by her days in the sun. During the short week he'd been at the job site, he'd never seen anything other than a ponytail. Judging by the looks on their faces, neither had the others.

His gaze settled on her lips, now a muted shade of burgundy. He fought the urge to head straight over and taste them again by forcing his gaze down. That's when he noticed her shirt had been rendered...sexy. Buttons had been undone, revealing the graceful line of her neck, and knotted shirttails showed off her flat stomach and the curve of her hips.

Justin realized he was having a physical reaction about the same time Marley swiped up her beer and downed half of it in a few gulps. Damn if watching her swallow didn't intensify the sudden throb in his groin. He was thankful for the shadow of the table. At the moment, it covered more than just the coffee stain on his jeans.

Bonnie's delighted laugh broke the spell.

“Warren, honey, dance with me,” she called above the noise of the bar.

Warren finally looked away from Marley and led his wife out onto the dance floor. Felipe invited a grinning Isabel to join them, and as they left, Chuck launched back into the discussion they’d been having.

Justin noted Tom’s reluctance to look away from Marley and it annoyed him even though he knew it was none of his business. Over the next half hour or so, he began to pick up on a few other things. Previously, Marley had passionately participated in the conversation, but now she remained quiet. Neither did the guys try to draw her in or provoke her like earlier.

She also drank more. That surprised him since he was almost positive she’d been leaving when she ran into him earlier. He’d figured she’d stay for one drink, then head out.

Just about the time he wondered why *he’d* stayed, he looked back over at her. Her gaze bounced away, and he realized she’d been watching him. His pulse kicked. She downed the remainder of what he thought to be beer three. Or was it four?

Despite his best efforts and an adamant reminder of her meeting with his father at the coffee shop that morning, Justin’s gaze drifted south again.

He blinked when he saw she’d untied the knot at her waist and her shirttails now covered not only her stomach, but the top of her thighs as well. Her hand hovered near her throat, and when she lowered it, he saw the button closest to the vee of her slight cleavage had been recaptured in its hole. He tilted his head a bit as he watched her from the corner of his eye. A few minutes later, her hand rose and another button met its fate. One corner of his mouth twitched.

Marley Wade was uncomfortable.

Her unease took care of any lingering doubts he might have had about her and his father being physically involved. She was definitely not the type to have a casual fling with a married man. Sympathy swelled for her discomfort, but he squelched the response during a trip to the bathroom. He needed to ignore the way she made him feel. Ignore her. On the way back to the table, he looked around but didn't see her tall form or chestnut curls anywhere.

"Where's Marley?" he asked.

Chuck lifted his beer. "She called it a night. Said she'd see everyone on Monday."

Justin looked toward the door with slight alarm. "Did anyone call her a cab?"

Judging from the blank looks he received, he was the only one who'd noticed how much she'd had to drink in the hour they'd been there. With a muttered curse, he hurried out to the parking lot. Relief washed over him at the sight of her truck.

He'd only taken half a dozen steps when he heard her raised voice behind him. Justin spun around and took in the scene. Marley pressed against the side of the building, trapped by some son-of-a-bitch who was about to wish he'd stayed inside.

"Come on sweet thing, let me have a little taste."

"What part of *NO* don't you understand?" she snapped.

Justin's fists clenched in preparation as he moved forward. "Is there a problem here?"

The guy stepped back and turned his head toward Justin. Before he could utter a single word, Marley sucker-punched him from the right. Impressed that she'd put her shoulder into it, Justin moved aside. The guy stumbled backward and his foot caught on a crack in the sidewalk, dumping him on his ass.

"No problem," Marley said calmly. She shook her hand. Grimaced down at it, and then turned her gaze to the dark-haired man on the ground.

Holding his jaw, the guy started to sit up. Justin stepped forward. "I wouldn't get up just yet if I were you."

"No one asked you," the man growled.

Justin placed his boot against his chest and forced him back down. Marley grabbed Justin's arm. "Let him up."

Justin frowned. "Why?"

"Let him up." She sounded like she wanted to punch *him* and glared at him until he removed his foot. When the guy finally rose to his feet, Marley took a step forward. His reflexive flinch made Justin smile in spite of his annoyance.

"No means *no*, understand, Jerk-off?"

"Yeah," the guy mumbled with a glance at Justin.

Marley's eyes narrowed. "And?"

"Sorry."

Her chin lifted. "I thought so." She shoved past both of them, headed for her truck with a long, confident stride.

"Where you going?" Justin asked when he caught up.

"Home."

"You sure that's wise? You've had a few."

She cast him an irritated glance. "I'm not drunk. I'm not even buzzed."

"I didn't say you were, but a breathalyzer would."

She came to an abrupt halt.

"Give me your keys, I'll drive," he said.

"You were drinking, too."

"I had one beer." He looked at his watch. "An hour ago."

He held out his hand and waited. After a

moment of hesitation, she tossed her keys to him and walked to the passenger side. While he reached for the driver's side door, she looked at him over the bed of the truck.

"I didn't need you to help me."

"I don't recall doing any rescuing," he agreed. He hid a grin by getting in the truck.

She opened her door and glared at him through the cab. "Rescuing?"

"Bad word choice, sorry."

After a moment, she stated, "I can take care of myself."

"Never said you couldn't."

She slammed the door, and Justin decided it was best to remain silent as he started the truck and shifted into gear.

"Where we headed?" he remembered to ask.

"Ridgewood subdivision." She didn't add another word beyond that and he figured the less personal they got the better.

About halfway to her house, he saw her look at him from the corner of his eye. He kept his gaze fixed on the road until she resumed her sullen stare out the windshield, complete with arms crossed resentfully over her chest.

He heard a sigh.

"Thank you."

The soft words were barely discernable and when he realized what she'd said, guilt slammed into his chest. She thanked him now, but when she found out he'd fired her...

"I didn't do anything, remember? And you're going to want to ice that hand."

Marley flexed her fingers as he approached an intersection. Her hand did hurt. More than she would've thought. Realizing he'd need directions, she told him to turn right at the same time he flipped the right turn signal on.



After she'd directed him to her house, something occurred to her. "How are you going to get back to your Jeep?"

"I'll call a cab."

He walked with her up the front porch steps. She suddenly had a very vivid recall of that kiss in the trailer and had just enough to drink that she would admit to wanting a repeat. Not to him, of course. It was bad enough to realize it herself.

She reached to unlock the door and was surprised when it swung open at the touch of her hand. Before she could consider the implications of the unlocked, unlatched door, Justin pushed past her.

"Anyone else home?" he asked quietly over his shoulder.

Marley frowned at his back. "It's just me and Nate—but his truck's not here."

"Stay behind me," he ordered when she tried to walk past.

Irritation flared at the way he took command. Hadn't she just told him she could take care of herself? He surveyed the empty living room and then moved into the kitchen.

Marley watched him go before walking over to the closet. Inside, she reached up to the overhead shelf, feeling for and locating her dad's Glock pistol. She silently conceded she probably wouldn't be so calm if Justin wasn't here—but she'd never tell him that, either.

After a quick check of the ammunition clip, she turned in the defensive stance her father had taught her years ago during one of his sober periods. She'd honestly never expected to have to use it. Justin returned from the kitchen, but pulled up short two steps into the living room, his gaze fixed on the gun she gripped in front of her.

"What the hell is that for?"

“Protection.”

He held up his hands while taking a step back. “Settle down, Marley—I was just—”

She rolled her eyes and lowered the gun. “Not from you, you idiot.”

He didn’t look convinced. “Do you even know how to use that thing?”

“I have an expert marksman medal to prove it.” She grimaced inwardly at how smug the statement came out.

“I don’t feel any better.” He eyed the weapon with clear uneasiness.

“Is the house empty, or what?”

“It appears to be.”

“Then relax, I’ll put it away.” She replaced the gun on the shelf and closed the closet door. Marley didn’t miss Justin’s expression of relief.

“Why don’t you look around and see if you need to call the police, and I’ll go call a cab,” Justin suggested before disappearing into the kitchen.

Marley did as he said and determined Nate had probably just forgotten to shut the door tight. Thinking of Justin’s hasty retreat, she shook her head with disgust and turned to look out the window at the view of the valley that she’d always found so peaceful. Not tonight.

Hell, she just couldn’t get it right, could she? For the first time in her life she was attracted to a man and in the space of an hour she’d made certain he’d never look at her with interest. Because if punching the jerk at the bar didn’t turn him off, the gun certainly would. Not to mention, she was his boss. Why couldn’t she seem to remember that glaring fact?

“Should I call the police?” Justin asked from the doorway.

Marley spun around. “No, nothing’s missing. It was probably Nate again.”

“Again?”

“Sometimes he forgets to lock the door,” she said. “I’ll remind him to double check it from now on.”

“Be sure that you do,” Justin said with a frown. “The cab’s going to be a little while.”

“That’s fine.” She walked toward him, curious if she could control her body’s reaction when near him. Within five feet, her nerve endings buzzed as if she’d walked into an energy field. Quickly, she skirted past into the kitchen. Damn, now what?

Then it dawned on her—she’d had a couple beers on an empty stomach. She didn’t feel typical tipsy, but that had to be the reason she felt so...tingly. Time for a distraction.

“I’m going to make a pizza, you want some?”

She glanced back to see him lift a shoulder. “Sure.”

Her gaze lingered on his broad shoulder, noting his usual black tee-shirt. With his lighter hair and hazel eyes, dark colors looked great on him. He shifted, leaning against the counter, arms crossed over his chest. To keep her attention from dropping lower, she turned to reach into the freezer for the pizza. After removing the cellophane wrapper, she placed the thin-crust pepperoni on the square pizza oven’s metal rack, slid it in, and spun the dial to ten minutes.

The moment she turned around, her gaze zeroed in on his stained jeans despite her best efforts. Feeling heat rush into her face, she quickly looked up and asked, “What’d you do there?”

He straightened. She thought she glimpsed a flash of unease before he simply explained, “Spilled my coffee this morning.”

“Bummer.” Then she heard herself add, “Hope it wasn’t too hot,” as if she was personally worried he’d injured *that* part of his body.

His slight smile became a smirk. "No, not too hot."

If her face was warm before, now it positively burned in the ensuing silence. The thawing crumbs of shredded cheese on the counter demanded she clean them up. Fisting the pizza wrapper in one hand, she set aside the cardboard bottom before reaching for the dish cloth draped over the sink divider with the other.

"So how is it you came to be an expert marksman?" he asked.

That question stilled her hand for a moment, then she resumed scrubbing the counter while casting him a sidelong glance. Should she tell him? Reveal the details of her past and chase him away for good? She almost laughed as she dropped the dish cloth in the sink and pulled open the garbage drawer underneath to deposit the cellophane wrapper. He wasn't hers to chase away, so what the hell?

"My mother was murdered during a break-in when I was three years old."

Shock registered on his face.

"My dad taught me how to use a gun when I turned thirteen. At first, it was so I'd be able to protect myself."

"At first?"

She shrugged.

"And later?"

"I wanted to spend time with him," she admitted, opening the refrigerator. Over the door, she explained, "We didn't have the closest relationship."

"I don't know," he said. "Target practice conjures up all sorts of warm fuzzies for me."

Marley couldn't help but smile. He had a sense of humor after all. It was dry, and a tad sarcastic, but it was there, nonetheless.

“Why do you keep it in the closet? Seems a little out of the way.”

“It wasn’t tonight.”

“And if you’re home and someone tried to break in? Like what happened to your mother?”

Marley saw his expression had changed. Not that he’d been smiling, but all humor had left his eyes. She looked into the refrigerator without even seeing its contents. His question made sense, yet knowing how her mother had died, she realized she’d never feared the same thing happening to her. Why not? Because she hadn’t been there when the robbery occurred? Or, because her father hadn’t told her what really happened until she was older...*after* she knew how to handle the gun?

She’d never really thought about it and didn’t intend to in front of Justin. She shrugged and said, “That’s just where my dad always kept it. Maybe I’ll move it.”

When she lifted her gaze again, he still watched her, his face too serious for her liking. Their direct eye-contact started her heart pumping faster. When his attention shifted to her hair, she self-consciously reached to push her curls back over her shoulder. Too bad she didn’t have an elastic band handy to pull it back.

“Your hair looks...” He paused, and she waited for him to finish even as she noticed he looked like he wished he hadn’t opened his mouth. Finally, he said, “Nice.”

She made a face. Because of his words and because it hit her she was standing there like an idiot with the refrigerator door wide open. “Go ahead and say it, I know it looks stupid.” She waved a hand at her face and encompassed her un-tucked shirttails. “Just like the rest of it. Do you want a soda?”

He cleared his throat. “I didn’t mean it that way,

it came out wrong. You have beautiful hair.”

“Yeah, right. That’s why the guys were staring at me like I’d sprouted horns.”

She’d never been so embarrassed as when she’d approached the table and seen the looks on their faces. Even a few beers hadn’t eased the feeling. Which is what had landed her here.

Desperate to change the subject, she reached for two cans of soda and waggled one can above the door. “Yes or no?”

“They were staring because you sprouted a body that they didn’t realize existed beneath your work clothes.”

“I’m still wearing my work clothes,” she pointed out.

“Yeah, but tonight you were *wearing* them.”

His suggestive emphasis elicited an unladylike snort from her. “This is the most ridiculous conversation I’ve ever had.”

Without bothering to ask again, she lobbed him a can. He caught it easily, then tapped the top to keep it from exploding when he popped the tab. Metallic tings filled the space between them. She had to shut the refrigerator door but didn’t want to give up its protective barrier. Though why she wanted protection from him now, she wasn’t quite sure.

“You want to know what I was really going to say?”

His low tone mesmerized her and she swallowed hard. “No.”

“Your hair looks sexy when it’s loose like that.”

She shut the door, laughing outright, glad he’d turned it into a joke. “I am the furthest thing from *that* you’ll ever meet.”

“You thinking you’re not sexy is sexy, Marley.”

His gaze caught hers and she realized he was serious. She quickly turned away to check the pizza.

One more minute. She grabbed the pizza cutter from the drawer next to the sink.

"You really don't know, do you?"

"There's nothing to know—not that I care anyway."

"Hmm. I think—"

"Pizza's done!" she said a bit too loudly. *Close enough.* "There's paper plates and napkins in the cupboard to your right. Do you want a fork? Or a glass for your soda? Some ice?"

Justin smiled as she threw questions at him. "No fork, no glass, no ice."

"Fine." She slid the pizza onto the cardboard disc and quickly sliced it. Carrying it in one hand, napkins and her own soda in the other, she headed toward the living room. "Let's eat outside on the back patio."

"I'll be right there."

She paused at the doorway as he grabbed the towel hanging on the oven door and opened the freezer.

"What are you doing?"

"Getting ice for your hand." Towel filled, Justin shut the freezer door and followed her through the living room. When she shifted to nudge the sliding door open with her hip, he quickly opened it and stepped outside after her, into the lengthening shadows from the setting sun. As she set the pizza down on a low table between two chaise lounges he simply stared at the view before him.

With all the trees that surrounded the house, he hadn't taken into account that she was at the top of a ridge that overlooked the city of Boulder. Whereas the rising sun had blinded him in the front this morning—*had that really only been this morning?*—the evening sun provided a stunning conclusion to the daylight hours in the back.

"Nice view."

"It's great, isn't it?"

The lights of the city winked on one by one, like camera flashes at a concert, only they remained lit. "The log cabin is a perfect fit for this location."

"I'd love to add on someday," she revealed. "After Nate and I get our company started."

Justin's attention went on high alert. This was exactly the reason he'd told the cab company to pick him up in an hour.

"What company?" he asked as they sat.

"I—we—plan to open an architectural firm. After Nate graduates."

He waited for her to continue, but all she did was hand him a napkin with two pieces of pizza. He passed her the ice-filled towel. The question he was about to ask died in his throat when she held her pizza in her mouth so she could position the ice pack on the bruised knuckles of her right hand. Then she took a huge bite and leaned back in her chair as she chewed.

He followed her lead, and before he knew it, the food was gone. Oddly enough, given the last words spoken and his original investigative intent in staying, the silence was companionable. He couldn't remember ever spending time with a woman who didn't feel the need to fill every moment of quiet with non-stop chatter.

Much as he hated to move, he knew the cab would arrive any minute. He picked up the sauce-stained cardboard backing and held out his hand for her napkin. "I'll do the dishes."

The grin she gave him made his heart thud. His gaze dropped to her lips.

*No, no, no.* He couldn't go down that road. He was her boss—

Whoa. *Was.* Technically, he could go down that road.

*And when she finds out who you are?*



Justin walked away. It'd never work. Besides, he still didn't know why she was conspiring with his father. For all he knew, his first assumption could be right and they *were* having an affair.

He thought about her innocence earlier, then just as quick countered silently that she could just be that good of an actress. Man, he hated this crap. When he heard her behind him, he dusted imaginary crumbs from his hands above the garbage, and forced a smile.

The sound of a horn in the driveway drew his gaze to the window first.

"There's my ride," he said unnecessarily. "Thanks for the pizza."

"Sure," she replied. "See you Monday."

He nodded, not wanting to speak the lie out loud. She followed him to the door to shut it behind him. Two steps off the porch, though, he spun around and returned. He shouldn't care. Should go home and let her take care of herself with that impressive right hook and intimidating gun. But...if what'd happened the other day hadn't in fact been an accident, it wouldn't hurt to remind her to be careful.

Grabbing the handle, he opened the door to lean back inside. "Marley!"

She whirled to face him with a gasp. He twisted the door handle back and forth and commanded, "Lock this."

Then he left.

## Chapter 7

*Dear Ms. Wade,*

*Effective immediately, your employment with Hunter Construction, Inc. is terminated. You will receive one-month's salary as severance and...*

Disbelief sent a hot flash through Marley's body.

*Fired?*

She sank down onto the couch in the living room, the letter crumpled in her lap. Exactly as she'd feared. The mistake of the other day came to mind, and she raised the letter with shaking fingers. It had been a costly one. She could understand if that was the reason, even though she didn't agree with the way they went about letting her go.

She read the letter in its entirety, realizing that beyond the point where she'd gone numb, there was only the end of that last sentence.

*...and your health care benefits will continue until you obtain alternate employment, or a period of ninety days has passed, whichever comes first.*

*Sincerely,*

*Justin Blake*

*Co-owner, Hunter Construction, Inc.*

She stared at the signature. What was it with that name these days? Were men by the name of Justin destined to turn her life upside down? First one kissed her, then another fired her.

There was no specific reason given for the termination, just the letter and the pitifully empty box of her things from the trailer, all delivered by courier this morning.

She sat up straight. She wanted to know why.

Not to defend herself—okay, so there was that—but even if it was a rightful termination, wasn't she entitled to know why?

Confusion and shock began to give way to angry resentment. She stormed to the kitchen and dialed the corporate office, but received a voice recording stating normal business hours were from seven a.m. to five p.m. Monday through Friday. Giving a frustrated growl, Marley hung up without leaving a message. She'd have to wait until Monday to confront the bastard. But what the hell did she do with her pissed off self until then? If she didn't know how much it hurt, she'd punch something.

She rose decisively.

"Nate!" she called on her way down the hall. "You up? I'm going for a run."

Receiving no answer, she bypassed her room and knocked on his door. She peeked her head inside and was only mildly surprised to see an empty bed, exactly as it had been since she'd made it the morning before. He was probably sleeping off his own anger—and most likely a hangover—at a friend's house. He'd been drinking more since Dad's accident.

Trying not to worry about that issue, she decided she'd talk to him later and changed into a tank top and some old cotton running shorts. Usually she ran in the evenings because of work, but today she needed a release for her anger.

Fifteen minutes later, at the popular Mountain Lion Loop Trailhead in Golden Gate Canyon State Park, she got out of her truck and did a few stretches on the bumper, all the while thinking about the letter. Yes, the rafters had been a mistake, and if that was the reason why she'd been fired, then fine. But tell her. Call her in, face to face and fire her like a man. This formal letter shit was so cowardly she was almost glad she wouldn't be working for Hunter

Construction anymore.

Finished with her stretches, she grabbed her water bottle and went to use the restroom in the visitor center before she jogged the seven mile mountain trail.

After exiting the building, she shifted into a jog around the corner and ran straight into a wall. At least it felt like a wall. Reeling back, she let her temper take over.

"Watch where the hell you're going," she snapped as she looked up—straight into Justin Blackman's heart-stopping hazel eyes.

"Sorry, didn't see you," he murmured politely, stepping back.

Mortification washed over her. Of all people to run into. She was dressed in her ratty shorts and an old tank top and she hadn't even brushed her hair before tossing it into a ponytail, damn him. *Wait a second, Marley, since when do you care what you look like?*

She frowned. When she started forward, he took another hasty step back. The flash of alarm on his face would've been comical if it hadn't been so insulting. She knew she didn't look the best, but she wasn't going to infect him with anything. Her annoyance deepened as she moved around him.

"Are you done or just beginning?" he asked before she could make a clean getaway. She faced him again. He couldn't tell? Man, she must really look bad.

"Just beginning," she said through clenched teeth.

"Me, too."

He looked and sounded way too chipper for her mood.

"Good for you." She gave him her back once more and headed for the trail.

"How's the hand?" he called after her.

She flexed her sore knuckles. "Fine."

"Want some company?"

Her step faltered. Run with him? Sweating and panting with him while she fought to catch her breath at eight thousand feet? Yeah, that's just what she wanted to do after the humiliation of having been fired. She shook her head and resumed her long stride. "I'm not good company right now."

He fell in beside her. With a sideways look she took in his running shorts and tank top, noticing his wide chest, bulging biceps, trim waist, and muscled legs. Man, she'd take a whole calendar of just him.

"I'm not looking for company," he said. She heard a grin in his voice and looked up to see his smile. Damn, he'd caught her staring.

Her gaze locked with his. "It's been a really bad morning, Justin. I just need to run." His smile faded, and he glanced away. He almost looked guilty, but she had no clue what for.

"How 'bout a race?" He swung around and jogged backward in front of her.

"I'm not going to race you."

"Chicken?" he challenged.

She stopped and put her hands on her hips, regarding him with narrowed eyes. Okay, fine. If he wanted to get trounced this morning, she was in the perfect mood to do a little ass kicking.

"First one up to the look-out point and back to the visitor center wins. And you have to stay on the trail," she warned.

"That's a given."

"Let's go." She jogged past with a vengeful smirk.

"Loser buys dinner."

He spoke from right beside her, and she almost tripped. Dinner with him? She glanced over.

"Just making it interesting," he clarified.

Of course, no big deal. It wasn't like it'd be a

date or anything.

“Winner chooses the restaurant.” He was going to pay dearly for this.

“Deal.”

Marley took off and Justin kicked it into gear, thankful he’d thought to challenge her to ward off any suspicion at the guilt he knew had flooded his face. How could it not when he was full of it? Not that it made any sense. He had every right to fire her, not only for her recent mistakes, but because whatever she was up to with his dad couldn’t be any good.

He recalled how she’d bumped into him, then gone on the offensive. His retreat had been instinctive after last night, because for a split second he’d thought she’d found out his real name and that she was going to punch him.

He didn’t think for a moment she’d be able to lay him on his ass like the wimp at the bar, but he wasn’t taking any chances. The right hook he’d witnessed had been dead on and as solid as they came.

She was one hell of a contradiction. A tough-as-nails attitude encased in natural beauty that became more enhanced every time he saw her. His mind told him it was best to keep away, but there was something about her that kept pulling him in.

He huffed along behind her, enjoying the view and biding his time while saving his energy. Or so he thought. By the time she reached the lookout, she was a good thirty yards ahead of him and he was dying.

He should’ve known. She wasn’t like any other woman he’d ever met. He should’ve known by her smirk he was in trouble. She approached on her way down as he continued to the turn-around. Sweat glistened on her brow and upper lip, and her breath came in short bursts like his. Not as bad as him, but

getting there.

Suddenly his thoughts took a sexy, seductive detour.

*Oh, come on. Not now.* He groaned under his breath and focused on the scenery instead of her toned legs and tight ass. Despite his best efforts, during which he nearly killed himself trying to catch her at the end, she still beat him by a few yards.

They stood alongside the water fountain, hands braced on their knees, heads hung low.

"Damn," Justin panted. "That's gotta be a record or something."

She looked at her watch, then raised her head with a weary, yet somehow still smug, smile. "I took a full minute off my time."

He scrutinized her face. "How often do you run this?" he asked with suspicion.

"Four or five times a week." She straightened, stretching her hands over her head. "You?"

He barely heard her question because the damp material of her top strained across her breasts. Raising his gaze with effort, he realized she truly didn't know her effect on men. Amazing.

"I run some, when I get the time." He drew in a deep lungful of oxygen and smiled wryly. "I don't get much time."

"Too bad." She didn't look one bit conciliatory. "Guess I have to start thinking of where I'd like my dinner, don't I?"

That's right, restaurant of *her* choice. Him and his smart ideas...why did he have the feeling the whole damn situation was going to cost him in more ways than one?

Meeting her gaze across the few feet that separated them, a little buzz of anticipation raced through him at the thought of admiring those eyes through an entire dinner. Before he could form words to set the date, she swallowed hard and her

expression became shuttered.

Another downward glance at her watch was so deliberate, he got the impression she was about to start running again. Her next words confirmed his suspicion, along with her hasty backward retreat.

"I gotta get going."

"What about dinner?"

She spun away, calling over her shoulder, "I'll let you know."

Ignoring his disappointment, he let her go. Any attraction between them had about a snowball's chance in hell once she found out who he was.

\*\*\*\*

Marley refused to think on her way home and the moment she arrived threw her over-stimulated self into the vigorous spring cleaning she'd never gotten around to a couple months ago. That got her through the rest of Saturday.

Sunday was another story. The day positively crawled by, between worrying about Nate's continued absence and planning a million possible conversations she'd have with the new owners of Hunter Construction the next morning.

Every once in awhile she thought about the dinner with Justin, only to quickly give herself a reality check. Completely thrown by the thought of her first date ever, she'd chickened out and blown him off. She didn't have to know about guys to know his ego wouldn't have appreciated that. And once he arrived at work on Monday morning to find her fired, he'd have no reason to feel obligated to make good on their bet. In fact, considering she'd never see him again, the smartest thing for her would be to completely forget about Justin Blackman.

For the most part, she succeeded. Until she laid in bed, closed her eyes, and pictured his intense hazel eyes the moment before he'd kissed her in the trailer. Then she tossed and turned half the night



before falling asleep about two a.m. Promptly at five, her normal waking time on weekdays, she found herself wide awake, staring at the dark ceiling. She fisted her fingers in her covers with a groan, then knuckled her burning eyes. Darn internal alarm didn't know she'd been fired and could've slept in as long as she wanted.

Armed with a pot of coffee, she spent the early morning hours memorizing the classifieds without enthusiasm. There were plenty of entry-level construction jobs, but she'd been there, done that. Having been ready to start a new chapter in her life with the internship, no way she would take a Rocky Mountain-sized leap backward.

She and Nate would have to figure it out somehow.

If Nate ever came home, that was. She hadn't seen him since the morning she'd fired him, and he wouldn't answer his cell phone or return her messages. It wasn't like him, no matter how mad he was.

She paused and acknowledged it wasn't like the old Nate. The new Nate was a whole other story. He made no sense to her. Worry tried to push forward, but she held it at bay. He'd left for a few days at a time before and been fine. He'd be fine this time, too, once he worked through his anger.

His deliberate distancing of himself made her heart ache. He was the only family she had left. They should be supporting each other now, not growing further apart. Why had he pushed her? Surely he could understand that she'd only done what her job demanded?

Apparently not.

The thing was, if she'd been a man in the same position, he never would've pulled the shit he had done. He wouldn't have dared to try it with Dad. Which went to show how much she had to prove

herself. If her own brother couldn't give her the respect she deserved, why was she so surprised when other men didn't? Mr. Blake would've talked face to face with a man, not sent a letter.

Marley straightened. She couldn't do anything about Nate at the moment, but she could make sure Blake didn't get away with his sexist discrimination. She deserved an explanation in person and, dammit, he would give her one!

Caffeine and renewed indignation propelled her from her chair straight to her truck. It wasn't until she'd parked in the lot of Hunter Construction's main offices that she realized she'd forgotten to pull her hair back. Glancing in the mirror, she decided it would have to do.

*Your hair looks sexy like that.*

Recalling Justin Blackman's words made her pause. She peered back into the mirror and decided he'd been pulling her leg. It was just hair for God's sake. Wavy, messy, in-her-face hair.

Flipping it back over her shoulders, she slammed the truck door and marched into the lobby, ready to do battle. The receptionist looked up with surprise, gave her the once over, then asked in a bored voice, "May I help you?"

"I'm looking for Justin Blake," Marley stated with haughty confidence, despite being acutely aware of her old jeans and plain tee shirt. She should've thought this through better.

"His office is on the third floor, but—"

Marley hurried to the elevators to catch the empty one waiting just for her. She jabbed the number three, then waited impatiently for the car to rise.

"Excuse me," the receptionist called as the doors began to slide closed. "You can't go up—"

*Settle down, Marley.* No sense going in there all fired-up. A few calming breaths did nothing to help.

Her heart pounded and her hands shook. As the elevator eased to a stop and the doors slid open, she tried one more deep breath before stepping out.

The receptionist's desk on this floor was empty. Good. Surprise was a key element in the art of negotiations, so even though she was on his turf, she'd still have that advantage.

She paused in her search for the Blake coward's office. Negotiations? Where did that come from? It wasn't as if she were going to ask for her job back.

She stopped abruptly. Yeah, she was. Or the internship at least. And why not? Depending on the reason he gave for letting her go, she might even be justified.

*Then you really need to calm down. Show him you aren't going to go off half-cocked just because someone throws you a curve ball.*

She could do this. Her father had taught her how to negotiate. Confidence swept through her and she resumed her search. There it was, right in the corner, with a name sign and everything. She knocked twice, then opened the door and stepped inside with determination.

"Mr. Blake, I insist—"

Whatever else she'd planned to say was lost the moment her gaze locked on the occupant behind the desk.

Justin Blackman in a suit and tie?

No. Justin *Blake*.

So many things suddenly made sense. Fury and humiliation swept everything else away, then doubled when he smiled at her.

"Hello, come in."

She slammed the door. The pictures on the wall bounced against the drywall. His eyebrows shot up as she stalked toward the desk.

"You lying son-of-a-bitch. Justin *Blackman*? If you wanted to fire me that bad you didn't have to

spy—”

Again she lost her words, now close enough to see his dark brown eyes.

“You could only be Marley Wade,” the man guessed in the silence.

“You’re not Justin.”

The Justin lookalike smiled at her confusion. “No, I’m Jordan. I needed something off his computer.”

“You’re twins.”

“Obviously.” He softened his sarcasm with another smile.

She stared at him, speechless.

“Most people can’t tell us apart,” he commented, turning his attention back to the monitor.

“Justin’s eyes are lighter.”

Jordan’s smile widened but he didn’t say anything. Oh, why did she even open her mouth? Then she remembered why she was here, and her anger resurfaced. She placed her palms on the desk and leaned forward.

“You two are despicable. Lying about his name just so he could spy on me. All you had to do was ask Chuck. He’s honest, he would’ve told you how I was doing. As for the rafters, I freely admitted it was my mistake and he told me not to beat myself up over it. His words, not mine.”

She shoved back and began to pace. “The rat was so nice about it—” She halted suddenly, remembering when he’d kissed her. “To think all along he was *my* boss,” she mumbled.

She caught herself from touching her lips and whirled to face Jordan again. “I should’ve realized something was up the way he kept bossing everyone around. I came today because I wanted an explanation as to exactly why I was fired, but it’s clear now. It wasn’t anything specific that *I* did—I was gone the moment you two found out I was a

woman. That's why he showed up out of the blue."

Jordan had been sitting back in his chair listening with a serious face and smiling eyes, but now he rose to his feet with an indignant expression.

She held up her hand on her way out. "Don't worry, I won't sue. You two don't have to worry about seeing me ever again."

She yanked open the door—and found herself face to face with Justin.

Marley's heart leapt at the sight of him, all ruggedly handsome in a black button down shirt tucked into his jeans. She wanted to punch him, but her hand hurt as she clenched it into a fist. So she uncurled her fingers and slapped him instead. One hard resounding crack that echoed through the reception area.

He didn't flinch or even take a step back. Their eyes met. He knew exactly what'd earned him the handprint forming on his cheek. Good, because she no longer had anything to say to the man.

She stalked past with her chin held high. Bonnie sat at the receptionist desk now, but she looked away from Marley's glare with a shameful expression. So much for sisterhood. Then again, Marley wasn't surprised; she'd never held a membership in that club.

"Does this mean I'm off the hook for dinner?" Justin called after her.

His expression on the running trail flashed in her mind and she understood the guilt she'd glimpsed when she told him she'd had a bad morning. She stabbed the button for the elevator and thanked God when the doors slid open.

"If I ever see your lying face again, it'll be too soon," she retorted over her shoulder.

As the doors closed, she suddenly remembered Dale Blake—Justin's father, she now realized—still had her designs for the Jenkins building. She should

go to his office and demand them back, because no way in hell did she want an internship with Hunter Construction now.

Her hand reached forward, then hovered over the button. She'd have to face Justin on the other side of the doors. She squared her shoulders, knowing that a man wouldn't think twice about the confrontation.

But she wasn't a man, was she? And what good had acting like one done her? Maybe it was time she started acting like a woman and see where that got her.

A woman would listen to her hammering, aching heart and regroup in private.

*Wouldn't she?*

## Chapter 8

Justin didn't reach to rub his stinging face until the doors of the elevator closed. All the while he fought the absurd sense of disappointment that had flooded through him the moment he realized his identity was no longer a secret. He'd known it would happen, so why should it matter to him?

Jordan's chuckle brought Justin around in the doorway.

"I guess she knows who I am." He closed his office door and crossed the room.

"Good guess." Jordan sat on the front edge of Justin's desk. "Your Marley Wade is quite the...observant woman."

"Obviously she's not mine. Not that I'd want her," Justin added quickly as he sat behind his desk. "She's got a hell of a swing."

Jordan laughed, swiveling to face him. "Well, she knew right away I wasn't you. Apparently your eyes are lighter," he advised with a grin.

Ignoring a tiny flare of pleased ego, Justin shrugged a shoulder. "So she's observant."

"Okay, whatever." Jordan straightened and scooped a folder off Justin's desk. "What brings you by the office? I figured you'd be down at the job site running the show, getting things back on schedule."

"Dad called, said he wanted to talk to the two of us about something. Besides, I got everything situated out there earlier."

"She thinks you fired her because she's a woman."

Justin's head jerked up. "She said that?"

"She assured me she wouldn't sue."

"How gracious," Justin muttered. Fired because she was a woman. What a load of bullshit. He stood corrected. She did know something about being female; she knew how to twist things around.

The door opened and their father leaned in. "Good, you're both here. We're meeting in the boardroom in ten minutes. Don't be late."

After he'd left, Justin placed his hands on his desk and pushed to his feet. "Let's go see what this is about."

"Yes, let's. And then, as long as you're here, we've got some business to discuss with him, too," Jordan said cryptically.

Jordan didn't explain further as they made their way to the boardroom. They were the first ones there and when Jordan started to take a seat along the side, Justin tapped his arm and motioned to the head of the table.

"Sit at the front. We own this company, not him."

When Dale entered the room and saw Jordan at the head of the table, with Justin to his right, he hesitated. Justin wanted to smile at the look on his father's face but kept his expression void of emotion. Dale recovered quickly and strode forward to sit at Jordan's left.

"Thanks for coming in, Justin. As you both know, the bidding for the new Jenkins building opens this week. Our architects have come up with a few proposals, but I wanted to show you this other design."

The Jenkins job would attract bids from across the country from every major player in construction, including the company Justin worked for.

As Dale spread a set of drawings on the table, Jordan sat forward. "That bid is worth millions."

"That's why I wanted you two to see this."



Justin took one look at the plans his dad laid before them and was instantly impressed.

"What do you think?" Dale asked after a moment.

Jordan looked at Justin. "I like it, but you're the expert."

He took a few more minutes to study each drawing. They were *really* good. In the corner of the last one, he noticed the artist's name in fine print and almost groaned out loud.

*M. Wade.*

He pushed the drawing away and sat back. "We can't use this design."

Dale stared at him liked he'd gone crazy. "Why not?"

"We need this," Jordan added quietly.

Justin's gaze sliced to his brother.

"The architect gave it to me herself," Dale explained. "In fact, she works for us. She's the general contractor out on the Forrester site."

Comprehension dawned on Jordan's face. Justin looked back at his father. "Was."

Dale frowned. "What?"

Justin blew out a breath. "I fired her. We can't use the design."

"Why did you fire her?"

*Because I thought you were having an affair with her. Because I also thought you might be conspiring with her to ruin the company Granddad left to us instead of Mom, and by default, you. Because—*

"I was going to offer her an internship so we didn't have to pay for the design," Dale told them with a deep frown. "Next time you might want to ask me before doing something so rash."

Justin sat forward with his jaw clenched. "First of all, Dad, I don't have to ask you when I want to fire one of my employees." His father's expression

hardened but Justin ignored it. "And second, it's unconscionable to take advantage of Ms. Wade like that."

"What do you know?" Dale spat. "She's been angling for that damn internship from the first time I met with her."

"That doesn't matter. I'm not sure how Granddad handled it in the past, but there'll be no more unpaid internships." He glanced at Jordan who'd remained silent. "Do you agree?"

"Completely."

"That's the whole idea of an internship," Dale explained as if Justin were five years old. "Both parties get something they want, it's completely legitimate."

"Not when you take obvious advantage, and you know this design is worth a lot of money," Justin argued. "Anyway, it's out of the question, she'll never come back. What else do you have?"

Dale shoved more drawings across the table to Justin. A quick glance at each one confirmed none compared; Marley Wade's inspiring design had the best chance of winning the bid for Hunter.

Of all the reasons Marley had been meeting with his dad, Justin couldn't believe *this* was it. He felt like a complete ass.

"Justin?" Jordan prodded.

After a quick glance at his father's smug expression, Justin met Jordan's gaze. Looking back down at the good-but-not-good-enough drawings in front of him, Justin gave a short, negative shake of his head.

"So now what?" Jordan asked.

"How bad do we need it?" Justin asked, even though he knew the answer.

"We're staring at crimson red."

Things just kept getting better and better.

"What the hell are you two talking about?" Dale

looked from one to the other. "Have you managed to run this company into the ground in less than two weeks?"

Jordan directed a hard look at their father. "As former CEO, Dad, you should be aware that any damage to Granddad's company happened long before we took over."

Dale's gaze narrowed, but he remained silent.

"Which brings me to another order of business we have to discuss." Jordan reached to press the intercom button on an electric panel built into the table. "We're ready, Bonnie."

The door opened and a rounded, balding man entered.

Dale looked back at Jordan. "What is this about?"

"Please sit down, Ron," Jordan said, ignoring Dale. "This is my brother, Justin. Justin, Ronald Reed, our chief financial officer."

After shaking the man's hand, Justin waited with interest to hear Jordan's answer to his father's question. Why did Jordan want to talk to their father with the CFO present? Ronald Reed sat next to Justin, and Justin noticed a sheen of sweat on the man's pasty forehead.

Jordan spoke first, directly to Dale. "There have been some withdrawals from your business account recently that haven't been accurately documented."

Dale bridled with indignation. "Are you accusing me of stealing the money?"

"We just want to know where it's going, Dad. The company is in serious financial trouble and every dollar needs to be accounted for."

Dale pounded a fist on the table as he stood. "You ungrateful sons-a—"

Justin rose as well. "Jordan simply asked you a question, Dad."

His father's blue eyes bored into him. "He's

accusing me of stealing from my own family!"

"He's asking for an explanation of some funds that you haven't even bothered to look at yet. Seems to me, if you didn't take the money, you'd be more interested in seeing what he's talking about instead of name calling."

Dale's gaze narrowed. He sat down without another word. Justin followed suit and listened over the next ten minutes as they went over the financials. While his father explained each of the questionable withdrawals, Justin's mind wandered—straight to Marley Wade.

Of course she would be the one to have designed such a beautiful and completely perfect building. It was just his luck lately. And, of course, their need for the Jenkins job was beyond desperate.

She'd never sell them the design after he'd fired her. He was pretty sure he knew her well enough by now to bet on that. But he couldn't blame her. He wouldn't, either. Besides, a design that good deserved the architect on hand for the creation.

He debated his next step, though really, he knew he had no choice.

\*\*\*\*

Marley dropped her bags to the floor and collapsed on her bed. No wonder she'd never liked shopping; it was exhausting. She might have only purchased a few outfits, but the sales girl had insisted she try on countless items.

Still, the girl had been friendly and helpful, without a single condescending look or snicker at Marley's lack of fashion sense. Marley was pleased with everything she'd bought. So far, this part of her journey into womanhood had progressed quite nicely. If only life were so easy.

The phone rang and she jumped to answer, praying it was Nate. "Hello?"

"Marley? It's Bonnie. I swear, I didn't know

about the firing. I want to apologize—”

Anger quickly overcame her disappointment at not hearing her brother's voice. She sat up straighter. “There's no need. Forget it.”

“No, really. I'm sorry. I—”

“Apology accepted.” She hung up the phone. She didn't want to hear excuses from a single person at that company. And if anyone really needed to apologize, it was Justin.

The phone rang again. She left her bedroom and started down the hall. She counted the sixth ring and heard the answering machine as she peered inside Nate's empty room. He had to come home sometime, right?

By the time she reached the kitchen, the ringing began again. When the machine told the caller no one was home, she reached to unplug the entire thing.

Justin's voice leapt from the speaker, making her jump. “Marley, I know you're there. Pick up the phone.” Long pause, then a grudging, “Please?”

She glared at the machine.

“Fine, have it your way.” He slammed the phone down and the machine clicked off.

“That's right,” she muttered. As if he had a right to be mad because she refused to talk to him? As if *she'd* wronged *him*.

The phone remained silent for the next hour. When she recognized a growing restlessness as disappointment, she stalked into her room to put her new clothes away. A light-weight, tan, scoop-neck sweater in particular was her favorite. It fit close, the solid material ending at her rib cage. The crocheted bottom extended to her waist, and the matching sleeves fell an inch below her elbows.

The sales girl had said she looked great and then handed her a pair of low-rise jeans that hugged her hips. Marley stripped off her tee shirt and pulled

the sweater on. Looking in the mirror, she decided to leave it on for a morale boost. Besides, she could get used to dressing more like a woman in the comfort of her own home.

By the second hour of silence, after she'd emptied the dishwasher and done two loads of laundry, Marley switched on the radio and began to clean the closet she'd avoided on Saturday.

He sure gave up easily, the jerk. Proved he wasn't worth her time moping around.

If you asked her, being a woman sucked.

## Chapter 9

Justin mounted the wooden porch steps of Marley's log home, his stomach knotted tight. He knocked hard to be heard over the music blasting from the open window and prepared himself to eat crow. Suddenly all went quiet. He knocked again.

The door flew open. He had a five second vision of Marley with free-flowing hair, wearing a sexy sweater and—

"Too soon," she declared and slammed the door in his face.

Music blared to life, twice as loud as before. He pounded on the wood. When he received no response, he paced to the end of the porch. Running a hand through his hair, he blew out a breath and fisted his hands on his hips, debating his next move.

His gaze narrowed on the door before he strode over and grasped the knob. It swung open without resistance. He really should yell at her for not locking it again.

His gaze swept the room, locating her reaching into the closet. Alarm shot through him and he sprang forward to grab her from behind. Pulling her back with his arms crossed over her front, he pinned her against his chest. She struggled against his iron hold.

"You aren't going to need anything you've got in there," he warned against her ear.

"Let me go!"

"I can't believe you were going for your gun."

She stilled and twisted to look at him over her shoulder. "Paranoid much? I was hanging up my

jacket.”

He looked down and, indeed, saw a jean jacket lying on the floor at her feet. Damn, he couldn't catch a break with her, could he? His shoulders relaxed slightly.

Her heat seeped into him, especially where his right forearm snugged under her breasts. Taking a deep breath to counter a surge of awareness, he unintentionally drew in her scent. She smelled good—as fresh as line-dried sheets. And he could feel the erratic beat of her heart. Desire urged him to turn her around and cover her mouth with his.

He dropped his arms and stepped back. “I didn't see the jacket.”

She scooped it off the floor with a defiant look at him before reaching for a hanger. Her head tilted toward the shelf above her, and when she faced him again, he was taken aback to catch the tail end of a smile.

“I don't recall inviting you in.” Her voice ran as cold as a mountain stream overflowing with spring runoff, and he forgot the brief flash of humor.

“I knocked.”

“And I didn't answer.” She put her hands on her hips. “You know, you seem like a smart guy.”

The glimpse of her navel through the bottom half of her knitted sweater drew his attention, but he forced his gaze up. “You should lock your door.”

“You should wait for an invitation.”

“I don't have all day.”

“Then go away.”

“Not until you hear me out.”

“Better clear your schedule.” She stalked past him, jabbed a finger to turn off the stereo, and exited via the sliding doors in the back.

He followed her onto the patio, reminding himself to keep his cool and get through this apology...and the obvious groveling she intended for



him to do. He needed her to take the job so he could get the hell out of there before he did something foolish. He needed her for her design.

She faced him with her green eyes blazing.

He wanted her for *her*.

"You," she said, "are a lying son-of-a-bitch."

She certainly knew how to start a conversation. Maybe she'd met his mom and knew what she was talking about?

"You," he replied, "are right."

She opened her mouth again, then closed it with a frown. *Hah*. She hadn't expected that.

"Don't agree with me."

"Okay, I won't."

Her lips pressed together as she crossed her arms and stared him down with that defiant look on her face.

*Where the hell to start?*

Marley tapped an impatient finger against her arm as Justin stared at her. The man's presence was too damn disturbing. He was too good-looking, and his arms around her had felt entirely too wonderful. She hung onto her resentment by a mere thread.

"I'm here to offer you a job."

That was as unexpected as him agreeing with her a moment ago. She eyed him with suspicion. "Why? You afraid I'm going to sue?"

He smiled without humor. "You have more respect for yourself than that."

He was right. How could he know that about her? "Why would you give me my job back?"

"I didn't say 'job back', I said 'a job'."

Hmm, this sounded interesting. "I won't work for you again. I don't trust you."

He looked at her for a long moment before turning his attention to the city in the valley below. "My reasons for doing what I did had nothing to do with you," he said quietly.

She huffed in disbelief. "You fired me. Exactly how do you figure?"

He shook his head. "I'm talking about lying about who I was. Isn't that the issue here?"

"That's only half of it, Justin. And why did you lie, anyway? Why not just be upfront about what you were doing instead of the underhanded spying?"

At first she didn't think he'd answer. Then she heard him blow out a breath. "It's complicated."

"In other words, you don't want to tell me."

He cast her a glance. "Not really."

Marley uncrossed her arms. "You told me not to feel bad about the mistake. You said it could've happened to anyone. Now I'm supposed to trust a job offer without knowing if one day you'll decide to just up and fire me again? I don't think so."

Her thread of resentment strengthened to a thick string as she started back inside. He hadn't even come close to apologizing, much less explained himself.

"Don't you even want to know what the job is?"

She faced him again. "It doesn't matter. I'm through with Hunter Construction now that the Blake brothers are running it."

"I want to hire you for the Jenkins building. If your design wins the bid, then you'd oversee the project. Supervised, of course."

Marley's hand froze on the sliding door handle. That was the design she'd given to Dale Blake. He must've shown Justin and his brother. Slowly she faced him to see he was as serious as he sounded.

"Dale said he'd ask about an internship." The moment the words were out, she could've kicked herself. An internship was peanuts compared to what he'd just offered.

"My father is a condescending, selfish jerk."

Taken aback, she said, "He's been nothing but nice to me."

“He wanted your design without having to pay for it. He was using you.”

She frowned. They’d been meeting for a few weeks, but he hadn’t known about her design before Monday. “I only showed him the design a few days ago.”

Justin started to say something, then changed it. “Regardless, I’m offering you a paying job—equal to what you were making before.”

The job paid more than that. But seeing as how she had no previous experience and had been willing to settle for the internship, she really shouldn’t argue. She raised her chin a notch. “First year architects start at least a pay grade higher.”

He met and held her gaze across the patio, bracing his hands against the back of a chair to lean forward. “After a two-year internship,” he countered levelly.

She almost said yes right then—until he shifted his stance and backed off just the slightest bit. The most innocent of moves that told her he wasn’t sure of her answer, even though she knew she’d accept. She couldn’t afford not to, career wise or financially.

But he wouldn’t be at *her* house offering the job if he didn’t need her. With a new awareness, she took in the rigidity of his posture, the tightness of his expression, and knew without a doubt he didn’t want to be here. The realization was empowering and disheartening all at once. She focused on the emotion she knew how to handle and slid open the French door. “You’ve seen my design, then?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Still no apology—no explanation of why she’d been fired in the first place? Wow, he really knew how to go about this.

“So you just want to use me, too.”

“No.” He pushed away from the chair to stalk

toward her. "Dammit, Marley, I'm going to pay you."

She shrugged and walked inside, then heard him bang the door shut as he followed her. She didn't care that she'd angered him, nor did she worry he'd change his mind. Facing him across the living room, she asked, "*If I accept, how do I trust you not to fire me again if things get 'complicated'?*"

"Besides the fact that I don't think you'd take it so well a second time around? You've got talent."

The sudden flash of his dry humor didn't fool her. "Compliments only make me distrust you more."

"No compliment, just a statement of fact. The building you created is beautiful, and I'd like to be part of bringing it to life."

He really *did* know how to go about this. Though careful not to show it, excitement coursed through her at the thought of her building coming alive. She raised her gaze to find him regarding her closely. His body language still radiated all kinds of tension. She crossed her arms and anchored her stance. Time to see just how bad he needed her.

"Why the undercover bit?"

His gaze shifted for a split second, then returned. "Take the job and I'll see what I can do about the higher pay grade."

Suspicion took root. Why didn't he want to talk about why he'd lied?

*Do you really care? Shut up and take the job!*

"Seriously? I'm supposed to trust '*I'll see what I can do*' coming from you?"

Muscles flexed as his jaw tightened. "You want it in writing?"

"For starters."

He shook his head with a bark of laughter and headed for the door. As he passed her, her heart rate sped up at the thought that she'd screwed herself royally. She spun around to stop him only to have him whirl to face her before she could speak.

“You know, this is fricken’ unbelievable. How in the hell does my father rate? You get cozy over coffee with the man who would’ve screwed you over without blinking but I get the third degree for offering you money?”

*Whoa. Back up.* “What do you mean, ‘cozy over coffee?’”

His mouth twisted in a disgusted grimace. “I saw you two Friday morning.”

“What’d you do, follow me?” She spat the question in defensive sarcasm, never expecting him to confirm it.

“Just once. And that’s all I needed to see.”

Dots connected in her head, setting off an explosion of anger that nearly blinded her. “*That’s* why I was fired?”

The flash of guilt in his expression was all the answer she needed. Besides, she’d heard enough.

“Marley...”

She strode to the door and yanked it open. “Get. Out.”

He met her glare. After a deep breath that he released on a controlled exhale, he stepped out onto the porch. But when she would’ve slammed the door, he caught it in a strong, unrelenting grip. His hazel gaze locked with hers and her pulse skipped a beat.

“Eight a.m. tomorrow at Hunter headquarters. I’ll have the contract ready for when you come to your senses.”

Then he slammed the door himself, leaving her gasping in fury, with an urge to punch something.

## Chapter 10

Marley parked in the back of the lot and tried to ignore the curious looks from the other people walking into the corporate headquarters of Hunter Construction, Inc. Judging by their faces, she'd have to seriously consider investing in a newer truck. She hadn't yet because she'd been preparing to spend the next two years on a shoestring budget with the internship. Now she could afford a modest car payment. Maybe better, if Justin kept his word about the higher pay grade. Then again, maybe she shouldn't hold her breath.

Eying the length of the parking lot, she paused before sliding from the truck. Finally, with a roll of her eyes, she slipped on her low heels and stepped from her truck with her briefcase and drafting kit. Halfway through the parked cars, she saw a black Lexus swing into the front row. When the doors opened and the Blake brothers simultaneously exited either side, her pulse increased.

She knew immediately who was who. Justin wore jeans and a sport coat, Jordan wore a suit and tie, much the same as yesterday. She studied them from behind, noting that Justin seemed taller, and a bit broader in the shoulders than his twin.

He turned toward her and flashed his heart-stopping smile. She pressed her lips together. *Heart-stopping my ass. He's gloating.* A strand of hair had escaped her ponytail and blew across her face as she neared the car.

"Good morning," Justin said.

Too bad she hadn't kneed the creep at the bar in

the balls, then she could've saved her punch for Justin. Now, her only choice was to ignore him. She tucked her drafting kit under her arm so she could yank the annoying curl from her eyes.

"Morning, Ms. Wade," Jordan said from the driver's side. He cast about a furtive glance. "I don't see your lawyer. Will he—or *she*—be joining us later, or were you telling the truth yesterday?"

*Wiseass*, she thought as he grinned. She liked him already.

"Shut up, Jordan," Justin muttered.

Finally, she offered up a sweet smile. "I don't lie, Mr. Blake."

Jordan laughed. Justin scowled. She didn't feel bad about the obvious dig. Like she'd really forgive and forget so easily just because he was the boss now? *Hell no*. She stepped onto the sidewalk where they waited for her.

"Please, call me Jordan."

She grasped the hand he extended. He retained his grip an extra second or two. From the corner of her eye she noticed Justin watching their exchange. She gave a final shake and pulled away. "About yesterday—"

Jordan shook his head and walked toward the doors. "Already forgotten."

She smiled her thanks, but he was two steps ahead. Damn these shoes. Justin matched his long stride to hers, making her even more self-conscious.

Jordan swung around suddenly. "Although, any time you want to replay that swing of yours, I'd love to see it again."

Heat warmed her cheeks, and she cast a quick glance at Justin to see his jaw clenched hard. Jordan chuckled before he opened the door and disappeared. Justin caught the door, motioning her ahead of him. She hesitated before stepping past, only to have to turn back to him for direction.

"Since you fired me, do I need to redo my paperwork?"

"No," he said in a low tone, his brows drawn together in a frown. "There are just a few things you need to sign for your contract. If you follow me, I'll show you your office."

Her own office? She hadn't expected that. Then again, she didn't really know what to expect. A bit of her resentment seeped away. Just a tiny bit. At the elevators she said, "You didn't really have to do a contract."

"Oh, yes I did." He jabbed the up arrow.

The doors slid open and they stepped inside. Silence dragged until the doors dinged at the third floor. Marley exited after him, her jaw clenched as tight as his. Dammit, she had nothing to feel bad about here.

Bonnie sat at her desk and Marley started to walk past, then turned. "Sorry I hung up on you yesterday."

The receptionist's smile morphed from hesitant to warm. "Don't worry about it. I'm glad to see you're back."

"Thanks."

Justin spoke from behind Marley. "Bonnie, can you bring us those papers in about ten minutes?"

"Sure."

He began walking again, and Marley followed, more nervous than she thought she'd be. The feeling increased when he opened the door to the office next to his.

"Here you go."

"*This* is my office?"

He nodded. "Since we'll be collaborating on the Jenkins project, it makes sense."

She'd be working directly with him? Every day? Her nervousness quadrupled. She set her briefcase on the desk and watched him walk to a side door.



"Take some time to settle in. I'll leave this open, let me know if you need anything."

Then he left her alone. Well, semi-alone. She could see him through the open door at his desk. Connecting offices? She forced her anxiety aside and looked around.

The room was equipped like an architect's dream. *Her office.* A split-top drafting table, complete with computer, sat near the window with an adjustable light attached to the head. Her design for the Jenkins building lay on its hard surface, spread out in all its glory.

She walked over to touch it, imagining herself sitting in the chair, creating more buildings to last for ages. Next to the drafting table was a station that had everything she'd need to build her models. She'd pictured this office in her dreams.

\*\*\*\*

Hands in his pockets, Justin leaned against the doorjamb, watching as Marley trailed her fingers over the table with a faraway look on her face. His gaze focused on her hands. Their delicate lines belied impressive strength. What would they feel like on—

He straightened abruptly. "Everything satisfactory?"

She startled at his voice. When she turned, her expression disappointed him. He'd expected gratitude, or pleasure. Something other than the cool mask she'd presented since the moment she'd seen him this morning. Obviously, she wasn't willing to let bygones be bygones. Yet she was here.

Bonnie's knock drew their attention. "I've got those papers you asked for."

"Thank you. Leave them on the desk."

After Bonnie left, Justin said, "Look over the contract when you have time. Take it to a lawyer if you want."

Marley nodded on her way to the desk.

"The building committee for the project just sent me an e-mail slotting our presentation for Thursday, late morning. Can you work up a model by then?"

Her head snapped up. "By Thursday? Are you serious?"

"Most of the time."

"I can't build a model in three days."

"Two and a half, actually."

Her eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to make me fail?"

He knew it would take an exceptional effort to do what he asked, but they had no choice. Only she didn't know that, so he decided to lay it on the line. "If you fail and we lose the bid, the company that my Grandfather built over the past fifty-three years will likely file bankruptcy within the next month."

Her eyes widened. He didn't flinch as she studied him for a moment, glanced at the table full of supplies, then back to him. Surprisingly, one corner of her mouth tugged upward. "No pressure, though, right?"

He allowed a small smile in return. "It's time to see what you're made of, Marley Wade."

She rose to the challenge, as he'd guessed she would. She was just that kind of girl. Off came the jacket of her business suit, tossed onto the back of her desk chair without a second thought. She started to roll up the sleeves of her cream blouse while at the same time kicking off her shoes.

The shoes again. He wanted to ask, but became distracted as his gaze traveled up, admiring her slim build in the most stylish, fitted outfit he'd seen her in. Actually, the only stylish outfit he'd seen her in. Those others didn't fit in the same category. When he realized he was staring, he gave himself a mental shake and said, "I'll leave you to it, then."

She didn't even look at him, bruising his ego

some as he took a seat at his desk and began working on the project budget according to the specs of her design. This presentation would have to be seamless.

Almost a half hour later, Marley surprised him alongside his desk. "This isn't a cruel initiation joke or something, is it?"

He hadn't heard her enter, but there she stood, hands on her hips, waiting for an answer. He avoided looking too long at the front of her blouse and met her suspicious gaze.

"No joke. Would you like to see the e-mail?"

"I'm going to need help," she stated, ignoring his question.

He sat back in his chair. "What do you need?"

"At least two more people with experience."

"I'll see what I can do." He reached for the phone. She didn't wait for an answer and as she returned to her own office, he watched the barely perceptible sway of her hips. It wasn't deliberately sensual, just Marley—which made it sexier than ever.

Ten minutes later, he joined her to relay his progress. "Vincent will be up in a few minutes. He has experience. But our other guy, Dan, is on vacation this week."

Her expression conveyed no more satisfaction than when she'd accepted the job. "For something this important, can't you call him in?"

"He's in Alaska. On a cruise with his wife for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. He didn't leave the ship's number, but I'd be happy to locate it for you."

She glared at him for a second, then surveyed the already cluttered drafting table between them.

"We'll put in a few extra hours," he said. "It'll get done."

"I don't plan to sleep the next forty-eight hours

as it is. Where exactly do you propose I pull those extra hours from?"

A knock at the door stalled his reply.

"Come in," she commanded.

Vincent entered the office, and Justin made introductions. They promptly ignored him as Vincent—or Vince as he insisted Marley call him—gushed over her design, then set to work following her explicit instructions without question.

Bonnie came in through Justin's office to give him a message, but when she showed interest in the project, Marley put her to work as well.

If he didn't know better, Justin would think Marley owned the company—or she'd been their boss for years. He wasn't sure whether to be impressed by her ability to adapt and delegate, or worried that she'd take over before he knew what had happened.

\*\*\*\*

Marley studied the model that had begun to take shape over the past two hours. So far, so good, but she feared it wouldn't be enough. And Justin made her nervous, coming in to stand over her shoulder almost every hour. Didn't he trust her to get the job done? Breathing down her neck would make it all the harder for her to actually finish this insane assignment.

Finally, she couldn't take anymore. "Hand me that cardboard, would you?"

His gaze followed her finger. She nodded when he reached for the item with raised eyebrows. He handed it over, but when he started to step back, she commanded, "Now hold this. No, right here."

He didn't say a word while she cut the stiff cardboard. Her fingers brushed his once and her breath caught as warmth radiated up her arm. Quickly, she handed him an uncut piece and barked out the measurements.

After watching for a few seconds to make sure

he did it right, she turned back to Vince. She directed his next few steps, answered a couple of Bonnie's questions while gathering the supplies she'd need next, then looked back at Justin to find him finishing his task. Checking it, she apparently decided she'd found another worker and gave him more to do.

When he hesitated, she asked, "What?"

He glanced at his office before drawing in a deep breath. "Nothing, forget it. What's next?"

Marley realized she'd pulled him from his own work. "If you need to go, then go."

He shook his head. "I'll finish it later."

She didn't argue because she needed him. Besides, if she was going to be working round the clock, so could he. It was his company, after all.

Sometime later, she heard, "Hey, how come I wasn't invited to the party?"

Marley glanced up to see Jordan at the door. Justin straightened alongside her.

"Some party," he groaned, his chest pushing out as he stretched his arms back.

Marley looked away from the enticing sight of his shoulders straining the fabric of his shirt, only to catch Bonnie watching, too. She noticed the blonde turn the same admiring look toward Jordan.

Her gaze followed Bonnie's and she had to admit, the Blake brothers were nice to look at. Married or not, Marley couldn't fault Bonnie for enjoying the scenery—especially when the scenery carried pizza.

As her stomach growled, Marley looked at her watch, amazed to see it was after one-thirty. The others dropped what they were doing and advanced on Jordan and the food.

"Wait," he protested, holding the two large boxes out of reach. "Who's got my tip?"

"Don't spit into the wind," Justin said. "Now

hand it over.”

Marley smiled to herself as the rest of them laughed. Justin managed to get control of the food, but when he started back toward the table, she shook her head.

“You come anywhere near here with those, and I’ll deck you.”

He stopped short. His glance at the model showed he understood her reasoning, but his look challenged her.

“Do it,” Jordan urged with a grin.

“She would, too.” Justin wisely switched direction, carrying the pizza into his office to set it on his conference table. Bonnie offered to grab sodas and when she returned, they all sat down to eat.

Jordan kept them laughing, confirming what Marley’d already guessed, he was the easygoing one of the two. Justin joked, too, but she sensed he took things much more seriously. She liked that about him, liked that they had that in common.

As quick as the thought registered, she shoved it away. The man thought she’d had an affair with his father, for God’s sake. No way in hell should she like him or be glad they had a single thing in common.

She finished her first piece of pizza, and though still hungry, she didn’t have time to waste. Tossing her napkin in the garbage, she stood to leave.

“You’re done?” Justin asked with surprise.

“There’s only so much time in the day.”

Vince shoved the rest of his piece of pizza in his mouth and started to stand. Marley waved him back down.

“Take your time, please. I’ve got a few things to figure out before we can continue anyway.”

“You’re sure?” He glanced back at the food.

She smiled. “Positive.”

Justin finished his second slice, wiped his hands, and though he wouldn’t have minded more,

he stood to follow Marley. Jordan caught his gaze and one corner of his mouth lifted slightly. Justin just shook his head and walked away.

Why did his brother have to be so damn perceptive? Okay, fine, he'd admit it. He wanted her. But the scary thing was, he really liked her—even when she was bossy and domineering. Yet she was still a suspect in his grandfather's death, and she hadn't bothered to deny any type of unethical relationship with his father, either.

He couldn't see it any longer. After working with her up close and personal, he couldn't even begin to imagine it...but it would've been nice to hear it from her. Not to mention, hand in hand with the Blake family motto "appearances are everything" came the knowledge that appearances could be very deceiving.

She glanced over when he joined her by the table. Across from him, Jordan stepped up to see the project, and Marley directed a smile at him. Justin held back the evil glare he wanted to give his brother.

"Thanks for lunch," Marley said.

"No problem," Jordan replied. "I was looking for Bonnie earlier and saw you all so engrossed, so I figured I'd help out the best way I could."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to take Bonnie away from her desk."

"I can find my own staples," Jordan assured her.

"I heard that," Bonnie called from Justin's office.

Marley grinned. Justin smiled, too, even though he wanted to take his fist and ram it into his flirting brother's face. He saw movement from the corner of his eye and looked over to see his father entering the office. *Great.*

"Good afternoon."

Marley turned at Dale's greeting, a wide smile on her face. Justin's unwelcome jealousy made a lightning swift transfer. He watched his father

approach with his chest all puffed out, as if he were the man in charge. Talk about deceiving appearances.

"Hi, Dale." Marley's tone was familiar and warm enough to further heat up Justin's resentment.

"I'm glad to see my sons have come to their senses." Dale extended a hand to her. "Welcome to the office."

Marley's hesitation before accepting his father's hand was barely perceptible, but Justin caught it. She had the same expression on her face as she'd worn in the bar the other night—polite and pleasant and perfectly normal for anyone who hadn't witnessed her sincere interaction with the men on the job site. Not the expression of a woman who'd been intimate with the man she was touching.

Despite the fact that only seconds before she'd greeted his father like a well-known friend, Justin recognized her discomfort and was confused. Unless she was just uncomfortable in front of him and his brother?

She pulled back from the handshake at the point that it was almost rude, and Justin saw Jordan toss him a quick look.

He ignored his brother, and Dale didn't notice much of anything except his own hot air.

"I look forward to working with you. Your father would be proud."

"I hope so," Marley said.

The mention of her father seemed to ease her tension and Justin wondered if he'd imagined the earlier moment. No, because Jordan had seen it too. Could it be there *was* more than business between Marley and their father? Justin didn't even want to think about it anymore.

Dale spoke again. "He would, I'm sure of it. What'd Nate have to say, by the way? This puts the two of you one step closer to your dream."



Justin noticed two things simultaneously; a shadow passed over Marley's face at the mention of her brother, and he heard an odd note in his father's question.

"Actually, I haven't talked to him in a few days," Marley admitted, reaching for a ruler on the side of the model board. Justin heard a note of worry in her voice.

"Everything okay?" Dale asked. "He didn't leave town or something, did he?"

"No," Marley said with a quick glance up. "He wouldn't do that."

*What kind of a question is that?* Justin thought. God, he hoped Jordan caught this, too.

"He's just taking some time to himself, that's all. He'll be happy when I tell him," Marley assured his father stiffly. Justin didn't buy her explanation. What was the deal with Nate?

Dale nodded. "I'm sure he will. Well, I've got a meeting at two-thirty, so I'll see you later."

After Dale left, Vince and Bonnie returned to work on the model.

"I've got some papers that need your signature," Jordan said to Justin.

"I'll be back in a bit," Justin told Marley before following his brother across the hall to his office.

"That was strange," Jordan said when he'd closed the door.

"What?" Justin asked, just to be sure.

"The whole thing. She was nice when she first saw Dad, then couldn't let go of his hand fast enough. Maybe you were right about the affair."

Justin's jaw clenched when Jordan voiced his own suspicion. He didn't want to be right about that.

"And what's up with her brother? She seemed upset when Dad mentioned him."

"She fired Nate last Friday."

"The day before you fired her?" Jordan asked

with a lift of his brow.

“Yeah, but after what she said, I get the impression she hasn’t seen him since.”

“Seems a bit odd he disappears right after we show up.”

Justin nodded in agreement. “Dad’s question was odd, too. Why would he ask if Nate left town when all she said was that she hadn’t talked to him in awhile? I’ll try to bring it up while we’re working.”

“Good idea,” Jordan said. “Don’t forget, they’re still the only Wades connected to Granddad besides their dead father.”

## Chapter 11

Marley straightened and stretched her arms in front of her. A groan threatened from the aches in her neck, shoulders and lower back. She wasn't used to bending over a table all day long. She didn't need to look at her watch to know it was late; the bright orange sun disappearing below the horizon and her complaining stomach confirmed the advanced time.

Vince and Bonnie had deserted her two hours ago and Justin had run downstairs a few minutes ago for the Chinese food he'd ordered for their dinner. The moment of solitude was welcome. With so much going on, it was hard to think. The job, Nate missing in action, the attraction she couldn't deny for Justin. Actually, she should be grateful not to have the time to think about Nate, because Dale's questions had reignited her concern.

Then Justin had returned and dominated her attention. Throughout the afternoon, she'd had to redirect her gaze countless times. Thank God he hadn't caught her staring, though. That would have been humiliating.

She looked at the model and estimated if she put in another twelve to fifteen hour day tomorrow, by presentation time on Thursday, it might be ready to go.

No, no *might* about it, she'd make sure it was. She sighed with a smile. She'd always hoped for something like this, but never imagined it could happen this fast.

*Easy, Mar, it's not built yet.*

"Hope you're hungry."

She spun away from the window to see Justin walk through her office into his, carrying the bag of food. Her stomach growled as she took a seat at his conference table with him and accepted a take-out container and chopsticks. Hoping he hadn't heard, she dug into her dish, unable to hold back an appreciative moan.

He smiled before taking his first bite. They ate in silence until he commented, "It's so quiet at this time of night. No one else around, no phones, the dimmed lights..."

She looked around, aware for the first time that they might be the only two left in the building. It didn't alarm her in the least. She'd been alone with him before. If anything, it heightened a sudden feeling of intimacy.

"Granddad used to work late, and he'd let me and Jordan play in the halls. We could run around and make all the noise we wanted. Actually *do* what we wanted. It was the one place I didn't have to worry about appearances. After awhile, Jordan stopped coming, but I loved the solitude and freedom."

Marley's heart melted for a little boy who sounded like he'd faced all kinds of constraints and craved the opportunity to be himself. "You miss your grandfather?"

He focused his gaze inside his half-empty container of food. "Yeah, I do, even though he resented me working for a different company and we weren't as close the last few years."

"I know what you mean. I miss my dad a lot, but when he was alive, we barely spoke."

"Anyone else besides your brother?"

She shook her head, staring at her own food.

"Everything okay with Nate?"

She stuck her chopsticks into the noodles and set the container down, her appetite gone. "I sure

wish I knew. I haven't seen him since Friday morning, and he hasn't returned any of my calls to his cell."

"Did you call his friends or check some of the places you know he goes?"

"I did, but no one's seen or heard from him. I hoped he'd understand what I had to do, but he's been so different since Dad died. So angry about the accident."

Justin stilled, his expression serious. "A lot of people feel that way, Marley—like maybe there was something that could've prevented it. If they'd only done this different, or paid closer attention to that, maybe that person would still be alive today."

She stared at his tight expression, all the darker for the faint shadow of a beard that had grown throughout the day. Anger resonated in his tone, and she noticed his hand clenched around his chopsticks. Her chest constricted at his obvious pain.

"You're speaking from experience?"

He blinked at her soft question, but whatever it was, he put it aside and his face cleared. "Everyone has things in life they wish they could've done differently. It's no big deal. So my dad's met Nate, too?"

She hesitated at the quick change of subject, then answered, "No, but we've talked about him. You know, when we were getting cozy over coffee at six-fifteen in the morning."

His gaze met hers. The question in his eyes did not need to be spoken out loud. She resented the fact that he'd even think she would knowingly have an affair with a married man and at the same time wanted to erase the possibility from his mind. Pride kept her mouth shut as she glanced at her watch to see the hour hand after nine. "I'd better get back in there."

Justin silently gathered the leftovers and

headed to the fridge in the corner.

Marley stood in front of the model table, considering where to continue while rubbing the back of her neck with one hand. Pressing her fingers into her muscles, she rotated her head in a circle to ease the soreness.

At the sound of Justin's footsteps, she dropped her arm and waited for him to step up to the table alongside her. Instead, his warm hands settled on her shoulders. She stiffened.

"Relax," he coaxed. "You must be tired."

His fingers kneaded her aching muscles. She didn't speak as he continued to rub along her shoulders, her neck, and the base of her scalp. She knew she should stop him, but it felt too good.

The only massage she'd ever gotten was the occasional knuckle rub from Nate, and judging by Justin's performance, her brother didn't know what the hell he was doing.

\*\*\*\*

Justin knew exactly what he was doing. Problem was, he couldn't seem to stop himself. It didn't matter about the arguments, he was her boss. He didn't know the extent of her involvement with his father, she still might be the key to the mystery surrounding his grandfather's death...and a couple others he could come up with if he tried.

But he didn't want to try. He wanted to touch—even if only for a back rub.

Unintentionally, he'd let his emotions show a moment ago. She'd given him understanding and compassion. The brief physical relief he could offer paled by comparison.

Another soft sound vibrated in the air. She swayed and leaned back against his chest. He closed his eyes, letting the sensation of her hair against his cheek intertwine with the scent of her. He wanted nothing more than to turn her into his arms and kiss

the mouth he'd been taking orders from all day.

She turned to face him of her own accord, her hair catching on the stubble covering his chin. The silky strands dragged across his lips in a sensual caress. He raised his hand to her forehead and pulled the silken strands free by running his fingers down the side of her face before brushing them behind her ear.

Desire combined with a hint of caution in her green eyes. He longed to crush her close. Instead, he slid his hand to the back of her neck and gently urged her forward. Her gaze searched his for a moment before she complied, her hands rising to his shoulders as her eyelids drifted shut.

The first touch of her warm lips strained his control. When he slid his tongue along her bottom lip and she opened to him, it simply vaporized. He pulled her against him with his free arm, connecting their bodies from hips to lips as his tongue swept inside to explore her mouth.

Her response was slow at first, as if she were savoring the experience. Justin had no patience for savoring as passion swirled inside him, boiling his blood and urging him deeper.

She pulled back, but he followed and moments later she returned his kiss with equal enthusiasm. She was so much more than he'd imagined, giving as much as he took. He'd almost expected to battle her for command, had anticipated the fight, but this thrilled him more.

He began to walk her backward toward her desk when the distant ding of the elevator pierced his conscious. Reality set in when he heard his brother's voice echo in the executive lobby.

"Justin? You still here?"

Marley tore away. Justin swore under his breath as he took in her mussed hair, glistening lips and increased breathing. Without looking away from

the beautiful sight, he raised his voice to carry to his brother. "What do you want?"

"A little help would be nice," came the irritated reply.

Justin ran his hands through his hair and abruptly left the room. Jordan piled box after box off the elevator, and Justin stopped at the doors.

"What the hell is all this?"

Jordan shoved a box into his arms. "Financial records from the past two years." He held on even after Justin had secured the cardboard. "Marley's still here?"

Justin didn't bat an eye as he replied, "We're working."

Jordan gave him a mock hurt look and asked in a lowered tone, "Do you ever tell the truth anymore?"

He frowned his indignation but Jordan only smiled.

"It was either that, or you're damn glad to see me."

Heat rushed to his face when Justin realized his brother's reference. He jerked the box free of Jordan's grasp and lowered it to a respectable level as Jordan's expression turned serious. "Sure you know what you're doing?"

"Just load me up," he growled.

Jordan added another box on top, and Justin turned to carry them to Jordan's office. Marley stepped into the lobby, her hair smoothed back into place, her chin held high. She looked him in the eye with no hint of regret—*thank you*—and then passed him to approach Jordan.

Justin paused, unable to help but watch and listen.

"Hi, Jordan."

"Hey, Marley—so that must be your truck in the lot."



"Guilty as charged. The scrap metal is mine all right." She picked up a box.

Jordan stepped forward to take the records from her. "We'll get them, you don't have—"

"I work—well, *worked* construction for almost eleven years. These are nothing, trust me."

Jordan hesitated, then picked up the last two boxes. As they all continued to his office, he commented, "Quite the first day for you."

"I've put in longer hours on the job site before." Setting her box down once they were in Jordan's office, she said, "And the model isn't going to build itself, so I'll see you later."

\*\*\*\*\*

Alone in her office again, Marley breathed a sigh of relief. Though she refused to be intimidated by the circumstances, facing the two of them had been hard. She'd practically thrown herself into Justin's arms, and Jordan would have to be blind not to know what they'd been doing.

Staring at the model, she only saw Justin. She closed her eyes and imagined his lips on hers again. Felt the tingly sensation in her limbs. No, there'd be no apologies from her. If anything, she wanted more.

With a shake of her head, she gave herself a reality check. She had a job to do and responsibilities to deal with that didn't include the newly discovered desires of a twenty-seven-year-old virgin.

Maybe what she needed most was a good night's sleep and then she'd be able to concentrate better tomorrow. Besides, after that amazing kiss, it seemed unlikely she'd get in any more quality work tonight. She began gathering her things together.

"Calling it a day?" Justin asked from the doorway.

She glanced up with a start. "I'll be in early tomorrow."

When she slipped on her shoes and started for the door, he fell into step alongside her. "Thanks for all your hard work today."

She gave him a tired smile. "Thank me when you get the job."

"I will."

His low tone sent a shiver down her spine and a rush of anticipation left her short of breath. It grew worse when he followed her into the elevator.

"You're going home, too?"

He shook his head. "I'll catch a ride with Jordan. I'm just going to walk you out."

"You don't have to do that."

"Yes, I do." She opened her mouth, but he held up a hand. "You can argue all you want, it won't make a difference."

She let go of the automatic protest and watched the numbers on the elevator change. A quick glance in his direction revealed him watching her. She smiled self-consciously. It was nice really, to have someone be concerned about her well-being. If she could put aside his ugly suspicions, he was a nice guy. Someone she could easily—

Her heart stopped for a moment then started racing. She swallowed hard and consciously finished the sentence—*easily learn to like*.

*That's not what you were thinking, Marley.*

She ignored the voice in her head, wishing her pulse would calm down. No such luck as they made small talk across the parking lot. When they reached her truck, she stowed her briefcase and turned to thank him.

An alien feeling of shyness attacked her when she met his gaze again. He, on the other hand, looked downright serious.

"Marley, I've been thinking about what happened earlier."

Her breath hitched. Would he kiss her again?

Her heart thumped faster, making her lightheaded.

"I shouldn't have kissed you."

Acute disappointment deflated her lungs. Anger filled them again. "The only thing between me and your father is a professional relationship."

He stared for a moment, then nodded with what she'd swear was relief. "Okay. But about the kiss...if anyone other than Jordan had walked in on us, they could've gotten the wrong impression."

"We certainly don't want that, considering how quickly people jump to conclusions around here." Sarcasm colored her voice, but she didn't care.

"The thing is," he explained with a frown, "Your new position typically requires experience. I wouldn't want anyone to think less of you—to not respect the job you do—because they thought you got the job with something other than your talent."

"How very noble of you."

"Well, you wouldn't want that, either, would you?" He looked and sounded irritated.

"Of course not," she snapped with equal annoyance.

"Then we agree. It won't happen again."

*Darn right*, she thought emphatically as she slammed her door shut.

No—wait. Not kiss him again? He made her feel like a two-ton bulldozer had just rumbled across her neatly landscaped life. He'd torn it all up, and now he wanted her to forget about it and go back to the way things had been?

Not if she had anything to say about it.

## Chapter 12

Justin pulled into the parking lot the next morning and smiled. Marley's truck was parked near the front, just as he'd guessed it would be, even though it wasn't quite six-thirty a.m. He knew her so well already.

His smile turned to a scowl. He'd found a woman he liked, who he actually understood, and who was hotter than hell—and she was off-limits. Maybe he could fire her again.

Pushing that tempting, unfair thought from his head, he parked his Jeep and met her on the sidewalk. Immediately he noticed her free-flowing hair. Damn, what happened to the ponytail she'd worn yesterday?

"I see you're back in uniform," he commented to distract himself.

Her chin tilted with instant defiance. "More than half the people I saw yesterday wore jeans." She let her gaze drift slowly downward. "Including you."

Heat spread through his veins like a wildfire. "I wasn't criticizing. From what I've seen, there's no dress code. Wear what you like." *But stop giving me the once-over*, he added silently, moving past her to unlock the building.

"How long have you been waiting?" he asked as he held the door for her. He only half-heard her answer because his eyes were busy appreciating the fit of *her* jeans. He'd have to talk to Jordan about establishing a dress code.

"I didn't think about what time the office opened

and then hoped someone would be in early," she said on the elevator ride to the third floor.

"I remembered you said something about it last night."

The doors opened, and she gave him a beautiful smile before stepping out. "Thanks for paying attention."

He enjoyed the view again as he followed her to their offices. Damn, it would be a long day if he couldn't keep his eyes off her.

Best to get some of his own work done. He strode through the connecting door and left her alone. After the third glance into her office, he blew out a frustrated breath and ran his hands through his hair.

All the reasons why *not* were ruthlessly repeated in his head until he was sure he had any wayward thoughts under control. He even managed to finish a few things so that when Bonnie came in at seven-thirty, he handed her his notes and asked her to get started on the presentation booklets and PowerPoint.

Vince arrived at eight, but even with other people in the building, Justin avoided Marley's office. Jordan stopped in to say good morning with a steaming cup of coffee for Justin.

"You snuck out early this morning."

Justin set the cardboard cup on his desk and reached for a file folder. "Marley came in early."

"You sure you know what you're doing with her?"

"What I'm doing is none of your business."

"Technically, it's half my business," Jordan argued.

"Nothing's going on."

"Didn't look that way last night."

Justin opened his mouth to tell Jordan where to stick his concern but Marley's voice from the

doorway made them both jump like they'd been doing something wrong.

"Hey. Morning, Jordan."

"Hi, Marley."

Justin watched his brother do a quick scan of Marley's slim form.

"Don't you look nice this morning," Jordan added to his greeting with a charming smile. "I like your hair like that."

Justin couldn't believe his ears. If looks could kill, his brother would be on his way to the morgue right now. Marley accepted Jordan's shameless, *inappropriate, backstabbing, underhanded* flirting with a grin.

"Thanks," she replied. "I like your...shirt, too. That's a good color on you."

Justin wanted to throw up. Black wasn't even a color.

"Justin?"

He cleared his expression and looked at her.

"Two additional people, remember?"

In other words, *Bonnie's busy, so get the hell in here.*

Who was the boss? He was. Who had the authority to give imperious orders? He did. Who needed her to get the model done by tomorrow? They all did. So who was going to ask frickin' "*How high?*" when she said, "*Jump.*"?

He was, damn it. And he hated Jordan right now.

"I'll be right there," he said through gritted teeth.

He rose and stalked after her. Instead of going into her office, though, he shut the door and faced Jordan. "What the hell was that?"

"That, my friend, was you taking orders from your employee," Jordan said with a wide grin.

Justin's eyes narrowed. "*Our* employee."

Jordan's smile faded as the warning registered. "I was being friendly."

"Be less friendly."

"Don't make it into something it's not, Justin."

"You did that. For someone who's so concerned with how things will look to everyone else, you don't seem too concerned about following your own advice."

"Me telling her she looks nice doesn't hold the same concerns as you shoving your tongue down her throat. Get control of your stupid-ass jealousy before you create a real problem for everyone."

He slammed out before Justin had a chance to respond. If it wouldn't have come across as childish and outrageously jealous, he would've stormed after him and decked him. Much as he loved Jordan, there were times he couldn't believe they were brothers, much less twins.

As he fought his violent emotions, it dawned on him that his rage went deeper than Marley. Jordan had always followed the Blake family tradition of keeping up appearances and to hell with everything else. And as always, Justin was expected to comply, too. He'd fought against that expectation his whole life, though before he'd moved out of the family mansion, he'd always lost.

Even now, he didn't always succeed. Case in point, his presence here.

He wanted to help, didn't want to see Hunter Construction go under, but at the same time, it still irked the hell out of him that he wasn't doing his own thing right now. Worse yet, he was bound by the constraints of what was best for the company.

He wasn't stupid, he knew he didn't have any other choice with Marley, but he didn't know how much more he could handle.

And none of it was getting them any closer to solving Granddad's murder.

*One step at a time, man, one step at a time.*

Opening the door between the offices, he went to help with the model. Marley handed him some materials, her fingers brushing against his during the exchange. He did his best to ignore the warmth of her touch and the coolness that followed as she drew away. He focused his attention on the project.

Marley leaned forward to view a small detail, then sat up, brushing her hair back over her shoulders while surveying the entire table. Justin noticed for the first time that her long hair had concealed the snug fit of her v-neck shirt across her breasts. He forced his gaze to her face.

He knew she'd caught his stare the moment their eyes met, but she didn't acknowledge where his had been focused. Instead she pointed out the next thing she wanted him to work on. A little while later, he heard her make a frustrated noise and looked up to see her gathering her hair at the nape of her neck, her arms raised, shirt fabric straining.

Justin cast a quick glance at Vince to see him engrossed in his work. A pair of headphones emitted faint, distorted rap songs. Satisfied no one else caught the show, Justin snuck another glance as Marley tied her hair into a knot with a few quick flicks of her wrists.

*Redirect. Focus.*

He made it until after their lunch of leftover Chinese. Then she tried to reach past him for something.

"What do you need?" he asked, his hands full.

"I'll get it."

She started around the table. With limited room, Justin backed against the wall, lifting his arms high to give her a few extra inches. It wasn't enough. She stepped on his foot at the same instant her backside brushed across his fly. He drew in a sharp breath as she shifted off his foot.



“Sorry.”

Then she leaned forward for the paintbrush she'd wanted, inadvertently putting her in full contact with his groin. Before he could do more than dart a glance at Vince again, she'd straightened and moved back to her chair. Oblivious to anything around him, Vince toiled on.

*Thank God.*

Justin's gaze went to Marley as he silently let out the breath he'd been holding. She didn't appear to have any clue as to what'd just happened. In fact, her single-minded concentration was actually kind of irritating. Clearing his throat, he swallowed as much of his desire as possible and redirected...again.

Things worsened as the day went on. The model took shape; the building even more impressive than it appeared on paper, but working with Marley proved to be torture.

An accidental touch here; an innocent brush there; stretching to relieve sore muscles; a pleased smile at their progress; her uninhibited, genuine laughter at any of the damn jokes he suddenly couldn't seem to stop himself from telling. In his defense, Vince had joined in the conversation and they'd all taken turns with the jokes, stupid and funny.

He didn't know how he'd make it through the evening after Vince left, but thankfully, Jordan brought in dinner. After a silent exchange over Marley's bent head—during which the earlier situation was acknowledged and resolved with a few raised eyebrows, the lift of a shoulder and a nod and a smile—the three of them sat down to eat. Justin couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun over a simple meal of subs and chips.

He left the table with a new level of admiration for Marley, only to discover it made everything else that much worse. He walked her to her truck and

said goodnight from a few feet away, his hands shoved into his back pockets to avoid temptation.

Watching her drive away, he decided doing the right thing sucked big time.

\*\*\*\*

Marley stepped from the elevator Thursday morning, unable to believe her future would be decided in a few short hours. She said a quick good morning to Bonnie and went straight to her office to add the final touches on the model.

The door connecting her and Justin's offices was closed, and she squelched the urge to go open it right away. He'd be in eventually.

Later, a knock at her regular door made her jump and her heart raced until Jordan stepped in, impeccably dressed in a navy blue suit and maroon tie.

"We're on at ten. You set to go?"

She gave him a nervous smile. "Ready as I'll ever be."

"You'll do fine."

She checked the model to assure herself all was in order, then turned back to him. She surprised an expression of distaste on his face as he looked down toward her legs.

"What's wrong? Did I get something on my clothes?"

His head snapped up. "No, nothing's wrong," he hastily assured her.

The connecting door opened and Justin walked in, coffee mug in hand. He looked amazing in a dark brown suit with a tan button-up shirt and no tie. The pants were tailored to fit his muscled legs to perfection, and his brown dress shoes sported a gleaming luster she knew she'd never see on a pair of work boots.

His step slowed. When she looked at his face, she caught a glimpse of emotion very similar to

Jordan's a moment ago. He stopped next to his brother, and the two exchanged a glance.

Putting her hands on her hips, she demanded, "What?"

"That's what you're wearing today?" Justin asked.

She looked down at her suit with its small black and white checkers. "Looks like it. Why?"

"Umm, let's just say it's not your...pattern."

Her eyes narrowed at Justin's evasive comment. "Your dad told me it looked nice. I trust his judgment."

Jordan grimaced. Justin said, "Remember when I told you Dad was a self-serving ass? I'd be willing to bet that when he told you that suit looked nice, he was still looking to secure your design for little or nothing."

Marley opened her mouth to argue but realized it had been just before Justin offered her the job. She really felt stupid now. "Is it that bad?"

"It's not *that* bad," Jordan offered kindly.

Justin snorted. "It's not that good, either."

Jordan smacked him on the arm.

"What?" Justin defended. "She appreciates honesty. Marley, sorry to say it, but you look better in jeans."

She glared at the both of them. "Real nice, guys. Tell me this just before we're about to go in."

Her first major career presentation and she was wearing a damn clown suit. She'd almost worn her new brown suit, but hadn't wanted to wear it twice in one week. Now, she had no time to change—she'd never make it home and back in time.

Then Justin's words repeated in her mind. She made a snap decision and started for the door with a purposeful stride.

"Where are you going?" Justin asked.

"To change."

He took a step after her. "You don't have time to go home."

"I've got a bag in my truck from last week at the construction site."

"I wasn't serious about the jeans, Marley."

"I am." She reached for the door handle.

"She can't wear jeans." Jordan looked from Justin to Marley with alarm. "You can't wear jeans. You'll make us look like unprofessional idiots."

She paused. "I'll just tell them I spilled something on my clothes or..." she gestured helplessly, "...something."

"That's—that's an outright lie," Jordan accused desperately. "You said you don't lie."

She looked at him. He really didn't want her to wear jeans in there, did he? Well, she didn't want to wear this suit. Problem was, he was right; she didn't lie. Her gaze shifted from him to Justin, and she walked straight for him. Justin took a wary step back, but she followed until they were a foot apart.

"What are you—"

Before he could finish the question, she braced herself mentally, reached under his hand, and tipped his coffee mug so the contents poured down the front of her suit.

"Hey!" He jerked the mug away.

"Justin!" She looked down at her wet clothes, thankful the coffee had been only luke-warm. "Look what you've done. Now I have to go change."

She gave Jordan a smug grin as she left. In the hall, Bonnie caught sight of her.

"What happened to you? Isn't the presentation in like," she glanced at her watch, "Fifteen minutes!"

Marley nodded and hurried past. "Meet me in the bathroom in five." She made the round trip to her truck with a minute to spare and started to change as Bonnie joined her.

"Justin told me what you did. Are you crazy?"

"Maybe." She stripped off her blouse and realized she should've thought the situation through a little better. Her bra was soaked, and she didn't have another one packed in her bag. "*Shit*. Now what?"

Bonnie saw her dilemma. "I'd give you mine, but it'd never fit."

Marley regarded Bonnie's figure and, for the first time ever, wished her chest were bigger. Turning her back, she removed the wet bra and slipped on the white tee shirt from her duffle before facing the mirror to see her nipples clearly defined. Her gaze met Bonnie's reflection.

"No," they said in unison. Marley groaned at her stupidity.

"Finish dressing," Bonnie instructed. "I'll go scrounge up a jacket. And, here." She handed Marley mascara and lipstick. "They'll never even look at what you're wearing. Well, after I find you a jacket, that is."

Without waiting for Marley's answer, she scooped up the coffee-stained checkered one and disappeared. By the time she came back, the jeans were on, the make-up was applied and Marley had begun to think she'd ruined her entire career with one stinking cup of coffee and dumb-ass vanity. She should've dealt with the damn checkers.

Bonnie held out a red-wine colored blazer for Marley to slip on. She buttoned it in front and faced the mirror. Good, it worked. She would even go so far as to say she looked nice.

"Where'd you get this?"

"Shari in accounting is about your size. She said you can give it back tomorrow." Then she started to pull on the band holding Marley's ponytail.

She reached to stop her. "I don't want it down."

"Twist it up into that knot you do, it's more sophisticated."

She did as instructed, then stood impatiently while Bonnie turned her, pulled a few strands free to frame her face, and stood back for a final inspection.

“Great. Much better than the checkers.”

“You didn’t like it either?” Marley asked with consternation.

Bonnie shook her head. “Sorry.”

“I feel like an idiot.”

“Forget it. You look awesome now. Chin up and go get ‘em. They were getting out of their cars downstairs when I was on my way back from accounting.”

Calling her thanks to Bonnie over her shoulder, Marley rushed from the bathroom to her office. Inside, she stopped short when she saw the empty table where the model had reigned. A knuckle-rap on the door spun her around.

“Come on, Renegade, they’re here.”

Justin stood at the door, Jordan just behind him. It was impossible to miss their sweeping assessment as she started forward, but she focused on Justin. When his gaze rose to her face, his slow smile gave her all the confidence she needed.

## Chapter 13

Marley shook hands with the Jenkins committee members, then stood aside while Justin and Jordan said their goodbyes. The moment the doors closed and the twins faced her, she raised her eyebrows.

"That went well...didn't it? Or was it just me?"

A grin split Justin's face, and he strode forward. "You were great!"

Before she realized his intentions, he pulled her into a hug, lifted her off her feet and swung her around twice. She hadn't even caught her balance when Jordan stepped up to hug her, too. But he only held on for a moment.

With a self-conscious laugh, she said, "It wasn't only me. We made a good team."

"Yeah, but your passion really hit home."

"I created it, I'd better be passionate."

A knock at the door preceded Vince and Bonnie's entrance. "How'd it go?" Bonnie asked.

"Marley kicked ass," Jordan proclaimed.

"We all kicked ass," Marley corrected.

Justin started gathering up the papers and files on the conference table. "Well, we'll find out for sure on Monday."

Marley didn't know how she'd survive that long. Everyone helped clean up and then Jordan suggested they all take the afternoon off.

Marley went to her office and actually sat at her desk for the first time. She'd been so busy with the model, she'd spent all her time at the drafting and conference tables.

Sitting straight in her chair, she rested her

palms on the cool, smooth surface of the cherry wood in front of her. A slow smile spread across her face. She had a good feeling about her future, no matter the outcome of the meeting.

Of course, she felt pretty damn good about that, too.

“Someone’s pleased with herself.”

Marley looked at the connecting door. Justin really did look nice in that suit as he leaned against the doorjamb, his short hair slightly messed from when she’d seen him run a hand through it.

“It was a good day,” she said.

“Day’s not over yet.”

Her pulse tripped at his low voice but she remained casual. “Seeing as all I’m planning to do is take a hot bubble bath and go to bed early, I’m sticking with past tense.”

He straightened and came further into the room. “Those are your plans?”

“Yep.” She reached for her briefcase and duffel bag and stood. “How about you?”

“Sadly, no bubble bath.” She laughed, and he smiled as he added, “I’ve got a few more things to take care of, then I guess I’ll head back to Jordan’s place. Maybe go for a run or something.”

“I’m too tired to even consider that. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He looked about to say more, and she waited with anticipation.

“Enjoy your bath.”

She held back her sigh of frustration and walked out the door. It’d been two days since he’d kissed her. Two days of smiling like an idiot and touching and brushing against him by ‘accident’. But it’d gotten her nowhere. Apparently, she wasn’t cut out to act like a woman any more than she could dress like one.

When she reached her truck, she tossed her



things on the passenger seat and turned the key in the ignition. Familiar clicking noises greeted her.

"Oh, come on, not now." She leaned her tired head against the steering wheel.

\*\*\*\*

Justin stepped from the building to see Marley leaning underneath the hood of her truck. He headed over and leaned under with her.

"What's wrong?"

She kept her gaze focused on the engine. "I have absolutely no idea."

"Marley Wade, I'm shocked." He held back a grin with effort. "You of all people, I would've thought would be able to jiggle a spark plug or re-adjust the carburetor to get this thing running again."

"That sounds doable." She cocked an eyebrow. "Where are the spark plugs?"

"I don't know," he admitted without apology. "I've always been more into building things than fixing them."

"Me too. Nate's my mechanic."

A frown crossed her face with the mention of Nate. Justin guessed she hadn't heard from him yet. Without giving himself time to think about why he shouldn't offer, he said, "I'd be glad to give you a ride."

After a moment of hesitation, she surprised him. "That'd be great, thanks."

"No problem." He glanced at his watch, then did a double take and mumbled, "Damn. Let me make a quick call."

"What's the matter?"

He pulled out his cell phone and they started for his Jeep. "I just need to reschedule a meeting at a job site."

"Will it take long?"

He cast her a strange look and held up the

phone. "A minute, maybe two."

She rolled her eyes. "The meeting—will it take long?"

"Oh. Well, no, but I don't have time to run you home beforehand."

"That's okay. I'll wait in the Jeep."

He let her convince him she truly didn't mind because he wanted to spend time with her. The meeting lasted longer than he'd anticipated, and he came out of the trailer to find her in a borrowed hardhat and protective eye gear, drilling holes through the studs to run electrical wire for the electrician.

"I can't leave you alone for a second," he half-joked, scowling at the men gathered around her.

Marley stood with a guilty smile. "Don't be mad at them. I was proving myself."

"Do I dare ask why?"

"I offered some advice and they looked at me like I was crazy, so I bet them."

"I'm not even surprised." He turned to the foreman. "What'd she take you for?"

"Twenty bucks."

Justin chuckled. "Never trust a woman in a—"

"Hey," she protested. "It's not my fault they didn't believe me."

"She's right." The foreman handed over the money. When she hesitated, he pushed it into her hand. "You won fair and square, and I always make good on a bet."

Justin led her back to the Jeep after she'd thanked the men with a disarming smile. He knew she wasn't flirting with any of them, but the looks they directed toward her awakened his little green monster again.

Digging his keys from his pocket, he said casually, "That reminds me, now that you work for me again, I still owe you a dinner."

She paused with the passenger door open. "That's right, you do."

Lifting a brow, he asked, "So how about it—or was your heart set on that bath?" That hot, steamy, sexy bubble bath he wanted to—

"Hmm, a relaxing bath in my whirlpool tub with mounds of bubbles, scented candles, and some music, or...dinner with you." She tilted her head with a teasing smile that heated his blood.

"No fair," he accused. "When you put it that way, *I* want the bath." *With you.* He slid behind the wheel before his imagination took off at full speed.

She laughed as she climbed into the Jeep. "Dinner sounds good, because then I don't have to cook, and I won't be hungry while I'm soaking in the tub later."

Yeah, but he would be.

\*\*\*\*

Justin looked at what was left of Marley's double fudge brownie sundae. Melted ice cream, spoon tracks in the fudge puddle the treat had sat in, and a smear of whipped cream on the edge of the plate.

"That," she said with a sigh, "was heaven."

He leaned forward to inspect her plate. "You missed a few crumbs."

She scraped the spoon across the fudge one last time and licked the chocolate off with a smile. "Everything was so good."

He couldn't remember what he ate, much less if it tasted good. Between his increased blood pressure watching her eat that dessert and the repeated mantra in his head as to why he couldn't pursue her, he was ready to explode.

"You picked it," he reminded, referring to the restaurant.

"It's my first time here, though after tonight, I'll be back again."

He agreed. The waitress returned with his receipt, and he rose to pull back Marley's chair. The look she gave him held an echo of her expression earlier, when he'd come around to open her car door, held the restaurant door open, pushed her chair in and rose when she went to the restroom.

He had the distinct impression she wasn't used to men treating her like a lady. Her reactions also made him wonder if she even liked it, but as she hadn't demanded he stop yet, he figured he'd carry through.

They spoke little on the way to her house, and he noticed she had her eyes closed most of the way. He knew she wasn't sleeping though, because her fingers drummed against her thigh and her breathing wasn't the even cadence of someone resting peacefully.

After parking in the empty driveway, he opened her door again and followed her up the stairs onto the porch. He told himself he was only doing the gentlemanly thing, making sure her house was safe before leaving her alone. But as she fit the key in the lock, he had to clench his hands at his sides to keep from turning her around into his arms.

"You know...Nate's not home. Would you like to come in?"

She said it to the door, then turned to meet his gaze. Would he like to? *Oh, yeah.* Should he? *Hell no.*

"I'll make some coffee, or if you'd prefer a beer..."

He'd prefer her. Right here, right now. The force of that thought sent him back a step. He cleared his throat. "I really should get going."

He began to leave before he changed his mind.

"Is it me?"

Her question stopped him in his tracks. He turned to find her glaring at him, hands on her hips. The suit jacket she'd worn all day parted, and he

now had an unobstructed view of her thin, white tee shirt underneath. It was suddenly very clear why she'd kept the jacket on, even in the heat of the afternoon when he'd left his suit coat in the Jeep. And *thank God* she'd left it on while drilling holes in the studs at the job site.

He dragged his gaze back to her face. Damn, she'd asked him something. "What?"

"Is it me? Or am I doing something wrong?"

He stared at her in confusion, still trying to get his mind back on track.

She sighed with obvious dissatisfaction. "I mean, I realize I'm new to this whole seduction thing, but it's turning out to be a lot harder than it appears on TV."

That didn't make much sense until the flashbacks started. A brush of her fingers here, the bump of her shoulder there, her tight ass bending over...

His eyes narrowed, and he gripped the railing.

"Are you telling me the past two days have been deliberate?" His voice rumbled low, the husky accusation unmistakable. Despite the shadows of the porch, he saw her blush.

Still, her chin rose as she openly admitted, "Yes."

He couldn't contain a groan of complete frustration and plowed his fingers through his hair. "My God, Marley, you've been driving me nuts."

She stared for a moment. "Is that good or bad?"

"Good—now that I know it wasn't just me."

She visibly relaxed. The beginning of a smile curved her mouth, and he was done for. He couldn't remember a single reason as to why he shouldn't take her right here, and frankly, even if he had, he would've chucked any arguments out the window without a second thought.

"Does that mean you do want to kiss me again?"

she asked. "Because the other night you were pretty adamant that it wasn't going to happen again."

Despite the desire beginning to tighten his gut, Justin laughed as he stepped back onto the porch. Grasping her arms, he pulled her against him. "You are unlike any woman I've ever met."

He began to close the distance between their lips. She pushed on his shoulders, halting him with a slight frown. "Okay—again—good or bad?"

"Good. Definitely *very* good."

"Well, that's good, then. Great, actually."

"Yes, it is," he murmured his agreement and began to lean again.

"And about you being the boss—"

He stilled. He'd just chucked those thoughts. "I'm trying to ignore that fact."

"We should talk about this."

"Talking is not always good."

"But don't you think my job performance will speak for itself? That people will be able to see my job has nothing to do with whom I slee—um—who I..."

She trailed off, her attention suddenly riveted on his shoulder where she picked at his shirt. That's when he realized she was nervous. "Are you trying to talk *me* out of this, or yourself?" he asked.

"Neither." She frowned. "Why would you think that?"

"Because you won't shut up."

"I just wanted to clear—"

"I can't kiss you if you don't shut up."

He waited, but she didn't say another word. He dropped his head an inch or so, watching her eyes close as she lifted up to meet him. Justin halted just before their lips touched, held his position, and watched her face.

Her breathing grew shallow. His heart pounded with anticipation. Urgency warred with desire. He

held steady, making the moment when they touched all the more worthwhile.

Marley felt the whisper of Justin's breath on her lips and waited...waited...waited. Every nerve ending in her body tingled with expectation. His scent, an intoxicating combination of sandalwood and male, completely took over her senses. The warmth of his solid body against hers was so stimulating she couldn't even imagine what it'd be like when no clothing separated them.

His hands at the back of her neck pulled on her hair until it tumbled free of its knot. She sighed as he threaded his fingers into her hair, first massaging her scalp, then combing through the length of her curls. His hands slid back up along her arms to grasp her shoulders and still, he hadn't closed that last inch between them.

She couldn't stand it any longer, not a second more. She began to open her eyes and that's when his mouth captured hers. His tongue sought immediate access. She opened at his insistence, relishing his immediate domination.

After a wild minute, she realized he was groping for the door handle and helped him get them inside without breaking contact. She definitely wanted privacy for what she had planned, because while her slip-of-the-tongue-decision on the porch hadn't really surprised her, she didn't want the whole neighborhood to witness the loss of her virginity.

Once the door slammed shut, he pressed her against it, his body grinding into hers with the force of his passion. His hands bracketed her face, tangling in her hair. The wood panel behind her had nothing on the male body in front, and her knees weakened.

Then the pressure of his hips subsided, and one calloused hand slid under her shirt, up her ribcage. His touch left a trail of fire in its wake. When he

cupped her breast, she drew a surprised breath. His fingers massaged as he lifted its slight weight. A soft moan of pleasure escaped. She lost all ability to think coherently.

"I know you wear bras, so was this planned, too?" he rasped against her lips as his palm brushed against her peaked nipple.

She made a negative sound and managed one word. "Coffee."

His husky chuckle sent shivers down her sensitized spine. "God, I love coffee."

His other hand joined the first under her shirt. He caught her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, and her knees nearly buckled. "Me too," she breathed.

Marley's imagination had nothing on the reality of his touch. The limited access he had under her snug tee shirt began to frustrate her. She shrugged out of the borrowed blazer and let it fall to the floor. He pushed her shirt up. Thinking he was going to take it off, she took a deep breath and raised her arms to make it easier.

After a still, breathless moment, she opened her eyes to find him staring, his hands resting at the top of her ribcage, material clenched in his hands. The intense look in his eyes and the low sound of appreciation he uttered made her feel beautiful and sexy...like a desirable woman.

He stripped the shirt off and tossed it. Suddenly self-conscious, she pressed close and sought his mouth again, wrapping her arms around his neck. His tongue intertwined with hers, every so often giving her a taste of the mint ice cream he'd had for dessert.

He pulled her away from the door and stutter-stepped them across the living room. "I didn't pay attention the other night," he whispered against her lips. "Remind me which bedroom is yours?"



“Second door on the right.”

She was really going to do this, wasn't she? Yes.

Not allowing herself to second guess the answer, she tugged his shirt from his pants and unbuttoned it as fast as possible. As she worked the material over his shoulders, her back came up against the wall next to the hall. She arched away from the smooth varnished wood and tried to move sideways into the hallway, but his body pressed her against the interlocking pine boards.

The cool surface warmed against her bare skin as the unfamiliar ache throbbing inside her intensified with the pressure of his hips. She felt the hard ridge of his arousal. Instinctively, she knew relief would come when he was inside her, and she slid one knee up along his thigh to shift their fit and increase the pressure at the apex of her thighs. The movement brought pleasure and frustration. He pressed harder and a tortured groan filled her ears. She didn't know if it came from her mouth or his.

His dress shirt was gone, but his white undershirt still separated them. She pulled the hem up, then flattened her palms against his chest to shove the material over his pectoral muscles. He reached a hand back to drag the shirt over his head. Marley drank in her first view of his naked chest and recalled her very first assessment of his physique. Calendar quality was an understatement.

She reached forward and let her fingers explore his hot skin, caressing the hard planes of his muscles as if *he* were a model of her own creation.

Justin gave a soft growl. “I want you so bad I can barely stand it.”

“Second door on the right,” she reminded in a desire-husky voice she never would've recognized as her own.

He leaned in to kiss her again with a roughly muttered, “In a minute.”

His lips left hers, trailing across her jaw to the side of her neck. Amazed by the sensitivity of her skin and the sensations engulfing her entire being, she wasn't prepared for the feel of his mouth on her breast. With the first flick of his tongue, she gasped. Then he drew the nipple inside his mouth and sucked. Her hips jerked as a shot of desire went straight to her core.

"Oh, *God*, Justin." Her breath rasped as if she'd just run four miles uphill, and her heart pounded so hard she felt each beat.

"I know." His breath was as ragged as hers. He shifted his attention to her other side, his sandpaper-rough jaw scraping against her skin. It was too much.

She wanted more.

She urged him up with her hands. He complied without taking his lips off her skin, working his way along her neck. She arched her back to grant him easier access while reaching between them to undo his belt. The buckle presented a bit of a challenge, but she managed it and began to unfasten his pants as he toed off his shoes. Her hands brushed against his pulsing erection and curiosity made her pause to explore the length of him.

"You'd better let me, or this'll be over way too fast," he warned in a low tone, pushing her hands aside.

A thundering boom startled the both of them and Marley barely contained her girly shriek of surprise.

## Chapter 14

Justin's gaze flew to the door as Nate Wade stepped forward and slammed the door shut.

"Get the fuck away from my sister!"

Justin glanced at Marley to see her trying to cover herself. With a muttered curse, Justin bent to swipe his shirt off the floor and handed it to her.

"Nate—" she began.

"Settle down, man," Justin warned. Nate swayed with his next step and Justin suspected he was drunk.

"Don't tell me what to do, you son-of-a-bitch."

Reasoning with him looked to be out of the question. Justin shifted his attention back to Marley to see her shrugging his shirt on and buttoning it up with shaking fingers. Tears shimmered in her luminous green eyes and his breath caught in his throat. He really did not like her brother.

"You okay?" he asked in a low tone.

"Fine," she bit out. "Pissed off, but fine."

Justin turned and heard her alarmed gasp at the same moment he realized he should've remained focused on Nate. If he had, he would've been able to keep the drunken idiot from getting the damned pistol from the closet. Too bad she hadn't moved it.

"I said get away from her." Nate walked toward them, the gun pointed unsteadily at Justin's bare chest.

"Nathan, what are you doing?" Marley demanded.

"Protecting you from this asshole."

Marley went one way, so Justin went the other,

to keep the gun from pointing anywhere near her. He stopped within five feet or so of Nate as Marley grabbed her brother's arm.

"You can't do this, Nate. Give me the gun."

Justin's blood thrummed in his ears. "Marley, get away from him."

"Shut up," Nate ordered before looking at Marley. "Geez, Mar, what the hell are you doing with him?"

"It's none of your business."

Nate shook her off his arm, his attention and the gun focused on Justin. "There's more to this than you know," he lamented to Marley.

"What are you talking about?"

Tension coiled Justin's muscles tight. "Nate, you're drunk. Put the damn gun down before someone gets hurt."

Nate's laugh sent a shiver of apprehension down Justin's spine. "What's the matter, Blake, afraid you might get what's coming to you and yours?"

"Nathan! That's enough. Justin's right, give me the gun."

When she took hold of his arm a second time, Nate shoved her away. Justin lunged forward and grasped the gun with his left hand, thrusting it upward while swinging with his right hand. His fist connected with Nate's jaw at the same instant the gun discharged.

Marley screamed.

Dazed, Justin realized he now held the pistol and Nate was on his ass in front of him with a split lip, blood dripping down his chin. A smoky-sulfuric smell stung his nostrils as Justin fought past the painful ringing in his left ear. He maneuvered the weapon in his palm until it pointed at the floor, then leaned forward to fist his other hand in Nate's shirt and haul him to his feet.

"You stupid bastard," he growled in Nate's face.

"You could've killed someone."

Marley rushed forward and tried to pull Justin's iron grip free of her brother. "Let him go."

"No problem." He shoved Nate so hard the younger man stumbled backward and slammed against the knotty-pine wall. A picture fell. The glass shattered on impact with the floor.

"Justin! Stop it, you'll hurt him." Marley went straight to Nate's side, where he leaned in a stunned stupor against the wall.

Justin glared in disbelief. "He nearly shot me!"

She looked up from checking her brother, and her anger fueled the rage that had boiled inside him since the moment he'd seen the weapon.

"I'm fine, by the way," he bit out. "That gunshot you heard didn't actually hit me."

Justin blew out a trembling breath, angry as hell over the entire situation, and still battling remnants of unfulfilled sexual desire throbbing in his veins. How crazy was that?

"I'm sorry," Marley said stiffly, sounding anything but. He laughed without humor. "No, that would be me—the sorry son-of-a-bitch who wishes he'd never met this whole whacked out family."

Hurt flooded her expression before her body stiffened and a cool mask slipped over her features. He wished for the words back.

"I think it's time you left."

The sharp edge to her usually husky voice told him exactly where he stood. Justin shook his head and strode toward the two of them. Nate straightened warily. Marley faced him with the confidence he'd come to expect from her. He held the weapon out, butt first, barrel slanted down, his gaze locked on hers in silent challenge. She didn't break eye contact as she snatched it from his hand.

He turned toward Nate and took another step. Marley started forward but Justin held her back

with an outstretched hand and a dark look. Wisely, she didn't push it. He leaned close to Nate and looked him straight in the eye. "Don't you ever threaten me again. And if I see you push your sister around again, or even hear of it, you'll be sorry you were born."

A flash of raw pain in Nate's blue eyes surprised Justin. But then his bloody lip and jaw tightened and he gave Justin a mutinous glare. Justin wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of waiting for a response. He spun on his heel and slammed from the house.

It wasn't until he reached the driveway that he realized he only wore his pants and socks. After a split second hesitation, he figured it'd be easier to buy new shoes, and the shirt, well, that wasn't worth the effort.

\*\*\*\*

Marley waited until she heard the Jeep spray gravel on its way out of the driveway before turning her simmering rage on her brother.

"What the hell, Nate?" She held the gun in front of his face.

He shoved her hand away with an annoyed scowl and strode past her to the bathroom. After returning the weapon to the closet, she started to follow him. About three steps along, though, she stopped and looked up at the ceiling where the gun had been pointing when it discharged.

When she located the spot where the bullet had lodged in a pine log, the moment she'd screamed in fear that Justin had been shot swept back over her, leaving her knees weak. She couldn't believe her brother's stupidity. Thank God Justin hadn't been hurt.

Nate came back from the bathroom, a washcloth pressed to his swollen lip. He walked past her toward his bedroom and her emotions focused where

they should. "Get your ass back here."

Nate kept walking. She stalked after him, catching his arm just before the kitchen. She whipped him around and jabbed him in the chest. "You can't walk in here after being gone all week, pull a gun and then act like nothing's happened! I don't even know who you are anymore."

Nate looked down and sneered at her shirt—Justin's shirt. "I can't believe you're screwing him."

She drew in a breath as heat rushed to her face. She hadn't, but had planned to.

"His name's not Blackman—it's Blake." Nate spat the name as if it left a bitter taste in his mouth. "He owns the company *you* work for."

"With his twin brother, Jordan, I know."

Nate's shoulders slumped. Unbidden, Marley felt sympathy creep in. He looked awful. Unable to help herself, she asked softly, "Where have you been, Nathan? I've been worried."

Her question sparked a return of his belligerence. "What do you care, traitor?"

He shouldered past her and almost tripped on Justin's brown shoes on his way to the couch. He kicked at them. His expression hardened even more when she picked up the shoes and set them neatly alongside the couch before sitting down to face him. This confrontation had been brewing for months.

"Do you really think I wanted to fire you?"

"You did it, didn't you?"

She forced herself to remain calm. "I couldn't let you slide anymore or it would've been my job on the line. You know we need my job so you can finish school."

He didn't say a word.

"Can't you even try to understand my side of it?" she asked.

"That shirt makes me want to puke." He tossed the washcloth on the end table to his left. Marley

took a deep breath and counted to ten, trying to ignore the fact that the shirt smelled like Justin.

"What's happened to you?" she asked Nate. "Ever since Dad died—"

"Ever since Dad died," he mimicked viciously. "Yeah, well, *fuck Dad*."

"Nathan!"

"Like he was ever there for us anyway. It was always about him. Even when he wasn't drinking, he never cared how we felt—even up till the day he died."

His bitterness shocked her. She'd always thought he and Dad were close. Certainly a lot closer than she'd ever been allowed. He looked at her, held her gaze for a moment, then looked away. In that moment she saw the brother she used to know and her heart constricted.

"Talk to me, Nate. What's going on?" she implored.

"You wouldn't understand."

He raised a hand to his lip, touched the split and pulled his fingers away to see if it still bled. His hand shook, and she reached to cover his other one resting on his thigh.

Squeezing gently, she said, "Try me."

He opened his mouth, but before a single word came out, his face crumbled, and he began to cry. Shock struck her speechless. She hadn't seen him cry since they were little kids—not even at their father's funeral three months ago. After a moment, she put an arm around her little brother, bigger than her by an inch and a good fifty pounds, and drew his head down on her shoulder.

"Nate, you're scaring me," she whispered.

"I don't know what to do anymore," he choked out.

"About what?"

He remained quiet for so long, she thought he



would clam up again. Then he drew a deep shuddering breath and pulled away. "I-I talked to Dad before he died."

"Did you fight or something?"

"I mean *just* before he died. He called me on the cell—*after* the accident."

Marley's heart skipped a beat. "Oh, God, Nate."

"He wasn't making sense. He mumbled about Dale Blake, about how the bastard had stabbed him in the back and—"

"Dale Blake?" she interrupted with a frown.

He nodded grimly. "He kept saying he should've killed him. Then he started talking about Mom and eventually I got that Mom had an affair with him. With Blake."

"What?"

"Then he threw in Karl Hunter's name, said he should've killed that bastard, too."

Marley sat back, unable to believe the words coming from Nate's mouth.

"Just before he stopped talking...before he died..."

Nate's voice broke and Marley gripped his hand in silent comfort.

"He s-said...*I knew it the day you were born.*" He looked at her as if she should know what he was talking about, but nothing made sense.

"Look at me," Nate exclaimed. "Blond hair? Blue eyes? You can't tell me you never noticed I don't look at all like you or Dad."

Dale Blake had blond hair and blue eyes.

"No." She shook her head. He looked more like Dale with every second. "No."

"I went to see him."

"Dale?" When he nodded, she frowned. "When?"

"Right after the funeral."

"You've met Dale Blake?"

He gave her an odd look. "I just said I went to

see him.”

Marley couldn't believe it. All the times she'd met with the man and he'd said he wanted to meet her brother, too. He'd brought Nate up at every meeting, asked how he was doing, what he was up to. He'd been lying the entire time.

“And?” she finally prompted.

“He's a bastard.”

Yeah, she could see that now. A lying, sneaky, underhanded snake who'd apparently ruined her family years ago, and for some reason wanted to get involved again.

In that instant, she recalled him saying she looked just like her mother and a shudder of revulsion shook her. No wonder she'd been uncomfortable whenever he touched her. No matter how often she told herself he was a nice guy, her gut instincts hadn't bought her reasoning.

“When I confronted him about the affair with mom, he tried to deny it, but I could tell he was lying. I mean, just looking at him...” Nate broke off, pounding a fist on his knee. Then he shot to his feet and began to pace. “He got real nervous then, warned me to keep my damn mouth shut—said he'd give me five grand if I went away.”

He paced to the window and stared out.

“You didn't take it,” Marley said, fearing the opposite.

“Of course I did,” he said over his shoulder as if it were a stupid question. “Why not? He's got the cash, why shouldn't he pay?”

“God, Nate. This is all so unbelievable.” Silence reigned as she tried to gather her thoughts. “You've got to give it back.”

“I can't.” He shoved his hands in his pockets. When he turned around, guilt was stamped all over his face.

“What'd you do with it?”

"I went to Vegas. It's gone." He sighed. "Along with the other payments."

"Other payments?" she echoed, her voice rising.

"He wanted me to keep quiet, make me go away, I made sure it cost him."

Dread swept over Marley. Dale's odd question in her office the other morning, about Nate leaving town, suddenly made sense. "You're blackmailing him?"

His eyes closed at her furious question. "I was. But then—"

"I don't believe this," she raged, leaping to her feet.

"There's more," he said quietly.

"Well, of course there is. I mean, after everything else, how could there *not* be?"

She waited for him to continue. When his gaze met hers, she froze at the terror she saw in his eyes. He held out a trembling hand, then sank to his knees and buried his face in his hands.

"Nate, what is it?"

He shook his head.

"Tell me."

"I—I think I did something." He looked up again, striking terror in her heart to match the fear in his eyes. "I—I went to see Karl Hunter a few weeks ago."

## Chapter 15

Marley went numb as her thoughts raced. Karl Hunter had died almost three weeks ago. And Nate looked scared to death.

*What had he done?*

“No,” she said. Her voice sounded foreign, as if someone else had spoken. But she didn’t want to hear any more.

“I didn’t mean to. Honest to God, Mar, I didn’t.”

She was at his side without having consciously moved. Scared as she was, he needed her. Her protective instincts kicked in, and she sank down to put her arms around him. With every fiber of her being screaming for her to shut up, she asked, “What happened?”

“I just wanted to know why Dad mentioned him—how much he knew—that’s all. Turns out, he knew it all. The affair, about me, even the money Dale paid me. Ironically, Mom tried to blackmail *him* after I was born. They even did a blood test for proof. As I was talking to the old man, he suddenly lost it...threatened to bury us—said he’d fire us both if we dared tarnish the Hunter name, and make sure neither of us could get a job anywhere in the state.” He took a deep breath and continued his disjointed speech. “I got so mad that I-I-I pushed him and he fell.”

Marley closed her eyes.

“He fell against the wall, but he was alive when I left, I swear. Knocked out, but I felt a pulse.”

She sighed with profound relief and sat back a little. “Nate, the obituary said it was a heart attack.”

“But what if I caused it?”

She shook her head, needing to believe it as much as he needed to hear it. “You didn’t. I remember Bonnie once said he had heart problems. He was on medication.”

For his blood pressure, she suddenly remembered. The confrontation very well could’ve triggered the heart attack. A chill swept through her as Nate looked at her with hope in his eyes.

“He was? So it wasn’t my fault?”

She shook her head, unable to actually speak it. Standing, she offered him a hand so he could rise as well. He swayed, and she helped steady him. “You need to get some sleep.”

“I am tired,” he agreed.

She turned him toward the hall. “We’ll talk more in the morning.”

“Okay.” He took a few steps and then stopped. “You’ll be working.”

That’s right, tomorrow was Friday. Justin would expect her at the office. Not that he’d want her there, but he’d expect her. She rubbed a hand over her face and turned to look out the patio doors. “After, then.”

She had to face Justin in the morning. How could she do that, knowing what she now knew?

“Mar?”

She spun around to find Nate watching her from the hall.

“Thanks.”

She nodded, but he didn’t leave. Instead he asked hesitantly, “Do you like him? I mean, really like him?”

He meant Justin. Was it really any of his business? Hell, maybe it was. Justin could be his half-brother.

“I wouldn’t sleep with just anyone,” she admitted.

"I should know that." He dropped his gaze as if he were ashamed. "I *do* know that."

She started to turn away again.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I—well, about earlier—about everything."

She regarded him for a moment. She wasn't going to tell him it was okay, because it wasn't. None of it was. The way he'd been acting. The blackmail. The gun. "We'll work it out—now go get some sleep."

He went and for a second she wished he'd come back. She didn't want to think right now. She didn't even want to *feel* right now. It hurt too much. After the past half hour, she was afraid her life would never be the same again.

She wanted to yell and kick and scream at the unfairness of it all but in the end she simply opened the door and went to sit on the patio in the cool evening air. A light breeze blew under her over-sized shirt. *Justin's shirt.*

Justin. Nate's half-brother. She'd almost slept with her brother's half-brother. She covered her face with her hands.

Events replayed in her mind, and she groaned. God, Nate had almost shot his own half-brother! She thought about her mother, with Dale Blake. If it were true, it would explain a lot. Her father's bitterness...the split between him and Dale...

She sat up straighter. Were they ever friends? Her father had said Dale stabbed him in the back, so it seemed it could be true, but everything else Dale Blake had told her had been a lie. All the while he'd been using her to find things out about Nate because of the blackmail. Upon reflection, Justin's description of his father was dead on—not that Nate was a saint by any means.

She sat for awhile longer, trying to figure out what to do.

\*\*\*\*

Marley dressed in jeans and a fitted, light green knit top. Then she brushed her hair and left it loose, added a light touch of brown mascara, and a swipe of clear gloss on her lips. Nate would give her a ride and work his mechanic magic on the scrap metal she called her truck.

Her brother didn't say a word as they walked out the door, but she knew he noticed her 'new look' by the expression on his face. She ignored it and stuffed her bag with Justin's things at her feet on the passenger side. How she dressed and wore her hair was her business.

When she told Nate to go to the Hunter offices, he paused. She remembered he didn't know what had happened in the past week and proceeded to catch him up on the drive. He didn't say much so she couldn't tell if the news upset him.

Then she pulled herself up short. Who cared if it did? He'd blown over fifteen thousand dollars in Vegas when what he should've done was paid on school loans, something that would've made him taking the money somewhat easier to swallow.

Nate drove past Justin's Jeep in the parking lot and her stomach turned over in a nauseous mix of anticipation and dread. She tried to ignore it as they parked, and Nate turned the key in the ignition of her truck before popping the hood for a look. After a moment of inspection, he rolled his eyes.

"Your battery cable is loose."

"That's it?"

"Yep." He reached in to tighten it. "All I need are some jumper cables to start it. I'll drive yours home so the battery charges on the way, and you can bring mine home after work."

She hovered as Nate connected the jumper cables between the two vehicles, started his truck and after a minute, started hers as well. He put everything away before handing her his keys. *Time*

to go *inside*. Still, she stood on the sidewalk, clutching the shoulder strap of her bag. "Thanks."

He paused while getting into her truck. "I'll see you later, then?"

She nodded.

"I'm going to class today, then I'll start looking for another job."

She nodded again before finally turning away.

"Thanks, Mar."

She swallowed, felt like a stupid nodder doll, and waved over her shoulder without looking back. She needed to prepare. The elevator ride was too damn short. She offered Bonnie a weak smile and made her way into her office, wishing her nerves would settle down.

This really wasn't that big a deal. It wasn't like she'd lie to him, she just wouldn't tell him what she knew. Other people did stuff like this all the time.

Too bad her conscience wasn't buying what she was trying to sell.

She heard Justin's voice through the open connecting door and couldn't help but glance through on her way past. Her step faltered. He was on the phone, half turned toward her with one booted foot propped on his desk as he leaned back in his chair. He'd dressed more casually than usual—even for him. A pair of extremely faded jeans encased his legs and a plain black tee shirt clung to his shoulders, molding his broad chest and enhancing his tan. His short blond hair looked like it might have been combed that morning, but had since seen his hand a time or two.

In the middle of a sentence, he turned his head and their eyes met. A jolt like she'd never experienced before shot through her. Marley stiffened as her heart leapt into overdrive.

Oh, God. *No*.

He pulled his foot off the desk and started to



face her, so she hurried past the door. It was hard to draw an even breath. She braced her hands on the desk and shook her head. But the possibility that had just scared the hell out of her wouldn't go away.

No. She did not have feelings for him. It wasn't possible.

Distantly, she heard his conversation continue, his deep voice rumbling over her as effectively as a bulldozer.

She'd only met him two weeks ago—twelve days to be exact. And he'd lied to her! *With good reason.* No, that didn't make it right. But just as quickly, she realized after the past week of working with him at the office, she didn't resent his deception at the beginning. She even understood.

Still, twelve days was not enough time to develop deep, heart-pounding feelings for someone. Sure, he was the first man to kiss her, *really* kiss her, the first to touch her intimately, and the first she'd ever thought about sleeping with—

Ah, ha. That was it. Her inexperience was confusing physical attraction with something else. Finally, she took a breath of air that actually sent oxygen to her lungs. She was in lust, nothing more.

The tightness in her chest eased somewhat. She could handle lust. Especially since any physical attraction was sure to be one-sided after last night's events with her *'whacked out'* family.

"Good morning."

Justin's deep, suggestive sounding greeting from the doorway brought her head up with a snap. The room seemed to shrink in on her and that damned lightning bolt struck again as his heated hazel gaze reminded her of the intimacy they'd shared the night before.

Heart slamming against her ribs, she opened her mouth to return the greeting.

"I quit."

## Chapter 16

Justin blinked and barely kept from asking, “*What?*” He knew what this was about. She was embarrassed about last night. Then he considered her expression and thought maybe angry was more likely. Well, that wouldn’t last long.

“Guess who was on the phone,” he said.

“Didn’t you hear me? I quit.”

“Tess Kemen from Jenkins Associates.”

“I don’t care. Here are your things.”

She practically threw a small duffle bag at him. He caught it, but irritation flared when she avoided his gaze and scanned the top of her desk. A few items were stuffed into her briefcase before she walked to the drafting table.

“We got the job.”

“Good for you,” she tossed over her shoulder without the enthusiasm he expected. Dropping the bag back on her desk, he stepped forward and took hold of her arm. She stiffened as he turned her around.

“They want to break ground next month already.”

She stared at his hand. “Don’t touch me.”

Her sexy voice, the one that usually slid over him and seeped into his pores to heat his blood, nearly gave him frostbite. Its husky timbre was tainted by a hint of emotion he couldn’t define. He released her arm. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” She lifted her briefcase and started for the door.

“Hold on a minute.” He barred her way. “You

can't just quit."

"Watch me."

"What about your design?"

"Keep it." She tried to move past him, but he sidestepped in front of her.

"The whole point of the job was to make sure you were compensated for your work."

"Send me a check—whatever you want." She shifted impatiently. Almost desperately. "I have to go."

He'd had enough. It was time to get to the real issue. "If anyone has the right to be angry about last night, it's me."

"This has nothing to do with that. Please move."

She had yet to look him in the eye, so he moved closer and accused, "Liar."

Now her gaze lifted. "No. And that's exactly the reason I can't work for you. Move."

He frowned. "I thought we put that behind us."

"Move or I'll scream."

"Yeah, right."

Eyes locked with his, she drew in a deep lungful of air as if preparing to make good on her threat. *Fine*. With a mocking smile—partly directed at himself—he shook his head and stepped back out of the office, sweeping his arm wide. She wanted to leave that fricken bad, let her.

He watched her stalk away, his gaze lingering on the curve of her hips and her long-ass legs. If only he could smack himself the way she'd smacked him that one day, maybe he'd be able to—

"Where's she going?"

Justin glanced toward Jordan's office to find his brother watching Marley the way he had been. His fist clenched at his side to keep from smacking his brother and he shoved both hands into his pockets for added security. "She quit."

Jordan's jaw dropped as the elevator doors slid

closed with Marley inside. "What if we get the job?"

"We got it already. I just got off the phone with Tess Kemen."

"Then why'd she quit?" He rounded on Justin with an accusing look. "What did you do?"

Justin leveled a dark glare at him before turning for his office. "Nothing. Not a gol' damned thing."

"Justin—"

He spun around, gripping the door hard to keep from slamming it in his brother's face. "You want to chase her and beg her to come back, go ahead. I'm not doing it again."

"And the Jenkins job?"

"Figure out what you want to pay her for the design and send her a check." When Jordan looked ready to protest, Justin added, "Her suggestion, not mine."

He lost the battle and let the door fly. It closed with an unsatisfactory bang that shook the pictures on the wall.

What right did *she* have to be mad? He was the one who'd been deliberately seduced, shot at and then ordered to leave! About the only thing she could've taken offense to was him calling her family crazy. But where the hell was the comparison in that? If you asked him, they were darn lucky he hadn't called the cops on their NRA-loving butts. He glanced at the door as he sat at his desk, wondering if Jordan had gone running after her.

"Work," he mumbled, reaching for a project folder. "That's what I need to focus on."

He spent more time in the next half hour telling himself to get to work than he did actually working. A knock at his door brought welcome relief, until a second later when he wondered if Marley had come back. Sitting up straight with his heart thumping, he told himself it didn't matter. But if it was her, she

owed him an apology.

A Wade entered his office, but it wasn't Marley. The resulting surge of disappointment mocked him, fueling his aggravation with himself and the man invading his space.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Justin growled as Nate shut the door. He rose to his feet, prepared to toss the guy right out of the building.

Looking a bit nervous, Nate hesitated.

Justin started around the desk, smiling grimly when Nate took a step back.

"Not so brave without that damn gun," Justin said.

Nate drew himself up. "For the record, I didn't shoot at you. The gun discharged when you grabbed my hand."

"You saying it's my fault?"

"No. I'm saying that I..." Nate stopped. "You know what, I'm not here to argue or make excuses. I came to apologize."

Justin acknowledged a grudging measure of respect for the younger man.

"I shouldn't have taken out my anger over...certain situations...on you," Nate continued. "I've been dealing with a lot of things lately, and with the alcohol, well, I didn't react like I... I wasn't rational." His gaze met Justin's squarely. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Justin almost laughed as he sat back against the front edge of his desk. Of course it wouldn't. One, he'd never let Nate get the jump on him again, and two, he wasn't so sure Marley would ever see him again.

Finally, he nodded. "Apology accepted."

"Thanks," Nate said. But instead of looking relieved, he shifted restlessly on his feet, his eyes cast downward.

"Something else?" Justin asked.

“Um, yeah. I’m sure you know Marley fired me last week.” He lifted his gaze and paused.

Justin nodded confirmation so he would continue.

“I was late more than a few times, but I’m hoping you’ll give me another chance. I promise I’ll do it right. I won’t be late. I’ll work harder than anyone else, and—”

Justin straightened. “Is that why you apologized? To get your job back?” The edge in his tone brought Nate’s chin up.

“No.”

Justin considered his solemn expression and relaxed again.

“I know you need the help out there,” Nate said. “Without me, Marley, and you, the job’s three men short.”

“I’ve already filled those positions.”

“Oh.” Nate looked deflated for a moment, then squared his shoulders. “Well, I had to ask. The apology still stands, of course.”

Justin automatically accepted Nate’s offer of a handshake.

“I’ll see you around.”

When he reached the door, Justin said, “Doesn’t mean we couldn’t use another guy. We’re still behind schedule.”

Nate paused to look back and Justin nodded.

“I appreciate it,” Nate said.

“Don’t screw up.”

The younger man’s relieved, grateful expression grew serious. “I won’t. Thanks.” He opened the door. As Justin pushed away from the front of the desk to return to his chair, Nate paused again. “Justin.”

He looked up from his desktop.

“Marley doesn’t date much. My dad dated a lot after our mom died, and the women weren’t always very nice, especially after they figured out he wasn’t

dating them so much as using them for sex and babysitting.”

Justin lifted his eyebrows but remained silent. *Why did this concern him?*

“After seeing the way Dad treated them, Marley went the opposite direction. She swore she’d never date unless she...um...found...” He left off that sentence to mumble, “Shit, she’ll kill me for this.” He met Justin’s gaze once more, a hard glint in his blue eyes. “She’s not as tough as she acts, and if you’re just playing with her, I’m warning you now, don’t.”

Nate walked out, leaving Justin staring after him.

*Unless she found...what?* Justin wanted to know what she wanted with an intensity that shook him. He surged to his feet, but after two steps, he made himself sit back down. He would not chase after her. She’d quit. No notice, no thanks, no see ya later. Just *“Get the hell out of my way,”* and no looking back.

His intercom buzzed, startling him.

“Justin—you gotta come see this.”

The combination of seriousness and excitement in Jordan’s voice made Justin hurry from his office, but two steps into the hall, he caught movement in his peripheral vision. A quick turn caught Nate being shoved through the doorway to the exit stairwell by none other than his father.

Justin pulled up short. After a glance toward Jordan’s closed door, he strode toward where the other two had disappeared. What did his dad want with Nate Wade? Nearing the exit, he heard his father speaking in a harsh undertone.

“...away from us. You’ve got no business with him—*with any of us*. And if you’re here for more money, you can forget it.”

Justin absorbed the shock of that statement even as Marley’s assertion that Nate and his father

hadn't met pinged his memory. He put his back to the inside wall and stayed out of sight.

"I don't want any more of your damn money," Nate said. "I wish I'd never taken it in the first place."

"Then give it back," his father demanded.

"Fuck you."

Justin frowned at the hatred in Nate's voice.

"Get out of here," Dale snarled. "You cause any problems for me, and I'll make your life a living hell. You'll wish you were never born."

"Too late for that."

Justin could just imagine his father's reaction to Nate's flippant statement. Any act of open defiance infuriated him, something Justin took pleasure in doing any chance he got.

Dale spoke again, his anger almost palpable. "Your sister, then. I'll—"

"Leave Marley out of this, you bastard."

"Now, listen here—"

Justin heard a thud, as if someone had been thrust against the wall. The sound was amplified in the vast height of the open stairwell.

"No, you listen, *Dad*. You don't want to claim me? *Fine*. I don't give a rat's ass. And even though I'd like nothing better than to ruin your family the way you did mine, I'd much rather no one know I'm related to a selfish prick like you."

Another thud, louder this time, though it barely registered in Justin's stunned brain. *Dad?*

"Stay away from Marley," Nate snarled. "Hurt her in *any way* and you'll wish *you* were never born. I've got nothing to lose."

Heavy footsteps thudded down the stairs and echoed back. Justin tensed when he heard his father curse under his breath before storming through the door. With his gaze focused straight ahead, he didn't see Justin press against the wall in an instinctive



move to avoid detection. When Dale slammed into his office, Justin stepped around the corner to discover Nate had indeed left.

*Dad?* Nate had uttered the word with enough disdain and loathing that Justin couldn't dismiss it.

Jordan's door opened. He started across the hall until his absent glance located Justin at the end of the hall. Justin met his brother's gaze as he walked toward him, still trying to come to grips with all he'd just heard.

"Where you been? Get in here." Jordan held his office door open with impatience. Justin walked in without a word.

"I finally broke Granddad's password for that last file. Wait till you see this."

Jordan pulled his arm until they were in front of the computer monitor. Justin skimmed what looked to be a scanned document, signed by both Dale Blake and Karl Hunter. One more shock to pile on top of the rest of his morning.

"It's an agreement between Dad and Granddad," Jordan said when Justin continued to stare at it silently.

"No shit." Justin sank down into Jordan's chair. And after what he'd heard in the hall, it made perfect sense. "Can you tell when it was created?"

Jordan leaned over, maneuvering the mouse to bring up the date as Justin buzzed Bonnie and asked her to get him Mark Wade's hire date and Nate Wade's birth date from human resources. Jordan gave him an odd look.

Justin leaned back in the chair, scrubbed his hands over his face, then said quietly, "You need to sit down."

## Chapter 17

Jordan's amazed expression told Justin exactly how *he* must look.

"This is un-frickin'-believable. Nate Wade is our half-brother." With a sudden sharp look at Justin, he asked, "What about Marley?"

Justin didn't even want to think about that. It made him sick to his stomach. Then he recalled Nate's warning not to hurt her. Surely, if there were any chance he and Marley were related, Nate would've said something—right?

*Right.* He'd make sure Justin never went near her again instead of giving his blessing in that roundabout way. Relief filled him, and with confidence, he said, "No."

"How do you know?"

"I know."

"Just because you don't want her to be your sister doesn't make it so," Jordan accused.

Glaring at him, Justin bit out, "I know because Nate interrupted us last night, and he came by to apologize this morning. If she were related to us, if I had been kissing my own damn sister, he would've said something."

Jordan made a sound of annoyance. "I thought we agreed you weren't going to pursue her."

"I didn't agree to anything. Besides, it hardly matters now that she quit."

"Because of you—you're thinking with the wrong head, man."

"Get off my back already." Justin surged to his feet and started for the door.

“You’re jeopardizing the company, Justin!”

He swung around. “How the hell do you figure? You’ve got the damn design and the Jenkins job. You said it’s what the company needed and I helped you get it.”

Jordan started to reply, recognized the truth in Justin’s words, and sighed instead. Justin felt some of his own tension ease as his brother’s expression registered remorse.

“I’m sorry,” Jordan said, turning back to his desk.

Justin ran a hand through his hair before dropping into a chair. “It’s a hell of a lot to deal with in one day.”

“You can say that again.” Jordan looked at his computer screen again. “I can’t believe Dad stayed with Mom all these years because Granddad paid him. Harder still to believe he kept our half-brother a secret.”

“Protect the family name and its connections at all costs,” Justin said with bitter sarcasm.

Jordan didn’t respond. *Typical*, Justin thought.

“Wonder what Cassie will say,” Jordan said.

“As long as it doesn’t affect her money, do you really think she’ll care?” Justin thought of their sister, who’d left for Europe without a goodbye and hadn’t called since. Well, she hadn’t called *him*. Maybe because he could never completely hide his cynicism toward her—she was just like the rest of them.

Elevating the family name, and maintaining their social status and high bank balance to ensure elite standing in the community was top priority. To hell with what a person might want or hope or dream of for them.

It scared him that Jordan became more like them every day. Too worried about what their parents might say, or how people in general would

view him or his actions. Justin didn't want to lose his twin—his best friend—to relentless demands and impossible expectations.

"You think Mom knows?" Jordan asked.

Their gazes met across the desk, and they both thought back over the years of their childhood. In public, Mom and Dad had portrayed the picture-perfect long-married happy couple, but at home you could've skated on the ice in the house on the Fourth of July.

As if he'd read Justin's mind, Jordan gave a self-deprecating half-laugh. "Yeah, okay, stupid question. So now what?"

Justin tapped out a beat on the arms of his chair. A sudden thought stilled his hands and he locked his gaze with Jordan's once more. "This puts Dad front and center. Obviously he didn't know Granddad was going to leave the company to us. That's why he was so mad at the reading of the will."

"I know," Jordan agreed. "I just didn't want to say it. I mean, *Dad?* Involved in Granddad's death? He couldn't be."

Exactly what Justin would've said before he'd heard the conversation in the stairwell. Now he wasn't so sure about anything. "We're going to have to figure out what happened all those years ago," he said as he stood.

Jordan's resigned expression told Justin he didn't particularly like the idea, and he didn't speak again until Justin reached the door.

"I'd like to meet him."

Justin paused. *Nate*. "They don't know I overheard them. I just rehired him, so let's let things settle down for a few days. Then we can take him out for a beer or something."

\*\*\*\*

Marley's lungs burned as if they'd burst. She pushed harder. Ran faster. Longer. Farther. Because

when her body screamed at the punishment, she didn't feel the empty ache inside that refused to go away.

It'd been three days since she'd quit. Three long days with restless nights and not knowing what the hell to do with herself. Nate tried to talk her into going back, but she ignored him. She liked that he took work seriously again, but he didn't have to deal with a rogue pulse every time he saw his boss.

Damn, there it was again. *Run faster.*

At the midway mark of the run she'd chosen, about five miles up, she stopped for a desperate drink of water. With her hands braced on her knees as she dragged air in, she wondered if Justin would've been able to keep up with her today.

The thought elicited a dismayed groan. Two weeks. Two lousy weeks, and she'd completely turned into one of those women who used to moon over her father. She hated the irony of it. The unfairness of it.

*Who ever told you life was fair, Marley?*

She straightened, stretched her hands over her head, pushed against a tree to extend her calf muscles, then started back down. Time to run him out again, for a few hours at least.

She'd only gone about a half mile when her cell phone rang. She thumbed the 'send' button to answer and got an earful of static.

"Yeah?" she panted, half-heartedly jogging in place.

"Marley? It's Chuck."

"Hey, what's up?" She looked at her watch, thinking she only had about another two hours before dark.

"Where are you?"

"About ten thousand feet—I'm in the middle of a run. Why? You need help with something?"

"There's been an accident."

Even through the static she heard the unnatural strain in Chuck's voice. She stopped jogging. *Oh, God, Nate.* She didn't want to know. She closed her eyes against the pain that constricted her chest and leaned against a tree.

"I'm with Nate at St. Mary's. He's in with the doctor right now, but I don't know how bad it is."

Her eyes snapped open. She started walking, then running. "I'm on my way."

"How long before you can get here?"

She increased her speed. "Hour, hour and a half."

She disconnected and extended her stride. She'd wanted to ask what happened, but knew it'd only slow her down. The drive to the hospital took longer than she'd expected and by the time she reached the parking lot she was frantic for news. Chuck met her at the door. Nate had been rushed into emergency surgery an hour ago for internal bleeding, but he hadn't heard anything since.

On the way to the waiting room, Marley asked what had happened. All Chuck could tell her was he'd returned to the job site for some paperwork and found Nate lying unconscious on the basement floor of the house. He assumed Nate had slipped and fallen, breaking a leg and hitting his head in the process.

As the minutes dragged on, Marley sat, then paced, and finally had to go down the hall for a cup of coffee as fatigue began to set in. Mid-reach for an insulated cup, she blinked at the sight of dried blood on her hand. She had a vague recollection of tripping on the way down and sprawling on her hands and knees. Looking at her other hand, then her knees, she saw her palms had taken the brunt of her momentum.

Dirt was ground into the bloody scrapes. For the first time that she noticed since her fall, they began

to sting. She turned around to search for a bathroom and stopped dead in her tracks at the sight of Justin striding toward her. Her mouth went dry. She felt lightheaded from an instant increase of her pulse.

His expression was wreathed in concern, his hazel gaze locked on her as he came closer.

"Justin," came a woman's voice. "The waiting area is this way."

Marley's attention shifted past him to a petite brunette who trailed around the corner after him. The sight of the beautiful woman in a summer halter dress reminded her it was a Friday night, and of course, he was probably on a date. Marley became painfully aware she'd just finished a ten-mile run. She was dirty and sweaty and dressed in her cut-off sweat pants and an old gray tee shirt that had holes worn along the seams.

When Justin stopped in front of her, she lifted her chin and strove for a cool tone. "What are you doing here?"

"Chuck called. Any word yet?"

She shook her head. He took her hand in his. Frown lines cut into his brow, but when he started to look down, she snatched her hand away to press her stinging palms against her thighs.

"He's still in surgery." She cast a glance at the woman who'd come to stand by Justin's side. Why did she have to be so damn pretty? And almost the exact opposite of Marley. Dark hair, dark eyes, flawless make-up, tiny...everything—except her chest. The top of her head barely topped Marley's shoulders, much less Justin's.

Justin looked at the woman, too. "You didn't have to come in, Kendra. Jordan's on his way. I'll ride home with him."

The woman laid a hand on his arm. Marley battled the urge to yank it off.

"Colton's parking the car. We'll wait with you,"

the brunette said.

Justin reached to cover her hand with his own. "Thanks, but it's really not necessary."

Marley couldn't watch any more, especially if he gave her a goodnight kiss. She brushed past with a mumbled, "Excuse me."

"Wait." Justin caught her arm. "How is Nate?"

She spun around, dislodging his grip in the process. "I told you he's in surgery yet. The doctor hasn't come out to give me a play-by-play—which is fine by me—I'd rather he concentrate on Nate!"

She got out of there, hating the snippy, jealous tone of her voice. In the bathroom, she took one look in the mirror and groaned. It was worse than she thought. Her cheeks were red and chapped from her run, she needed some lip balm and more desperately, a brush.

The hot water and soap stung her hands, bringing the pain to the forefront again. Marley met her own gaze in the mirror and suddenly felt awful. Nate lay in the other room, God only knew how bad, and she was stressing over her hair. She straightened her shoulders and flicked her tangled ponytail back over her shoulder.

There were more important things to worry about right now.

After splashing cold water on her face, she returned to the waiting room where Justin sat on a couch across from Chuck with Kendra at his side. The petite brunette rubbed a hand over Justin's shoulder.

Marley walked up to them, meeting Justin's wary gaze head on. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have vented my anxiety on you."

Compassion flooded his eyes as he rose. "Marley, it's okay. I understand you're worried about Nate. You don't have to apologize."

She shrugged and looked away. *Where was the*



*doctor? Why was it taking so long?* She didn't want to stand here, wanting Justin to take her in his arms—Kendra or no—and assure her everything would be okay.

From opposite directions, two men entered the room; Marley only had eyes for the one wearing blue surgical scrubs.

"Ms. Wade?" He looked between her and Kendra.

Marley forced herself to step forward. "I'm Marley Wade."

His smile ignited hope in her chest.

"I've set your brother's leg, and we located and repaired the site of his internal bleeding."

Marley swayed with relief as her knees threatened to buckle. A steady pair of arms lent support from behind. Justin's sandalwood cologne filled her senses, and she felt some of her energy return. His presence was a great remedy for exhaustion.

"He'll have to stay for a few days so we can make sure the internal bleeding has completely stopped, but I'm fairly certain after his leg heals, he should be good as new."

"When can we see him?" Justin asked.

"A nurse will come get you when he's out of recovery."

When the doctor left, Marley closed her eyes. Justin turned her in his arms. She leaned into his tight hug, accepting his comfort as the heat of his body seeped into her limbs. She slid her arms around his waist, under his sport coat. It felt so good to depend on someone other than herself for once.

"He's going to be okay," Justin murmured against her temple. His lips caressed her skin, his breath stirring her hair, and a shiver made its way up her spine. She nodded against his shoulder and opened her eyes.

First thing she saw was a man with one arm around Kendra's shoulders and his other hand on her knee as they sat close to each other. Kendra's left hand rested on his, showing off a beautiful wedding ring.

Marley's relief over Nate was magnified by the realization that Justin wasn't dating the perfect little woman on the couch. She lifted her head, her gaze meeting with Justin's. His hand rose to brush a strand of hair off her cheek before his fingers cupped the back of her head.

Her pulse kicked up as he leaned forward. Ever so softly, his lips touched to hers, and she wanted nothing more than to press closer to his strength. From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of Jordan entering the room. Her location hit with the force of a wrecking ball.

What the hell was she doing, kissing him in front of strangers—and Chuck! Not to mention, Nate was Justin and Jordan's half-brother *and* he might be responsible for their grandfather's death!

To protect her brother, she needed to stay away from them, Justin in particular. Clearly, she had no self-control where he was concerned.

She stiffened in his arms and pulled free. He let her go without argument, for which she was thankful and—after her thoughts from a second ago—contradictorily disappointed. The opposite emotions set her even more on edge, and she turned her back to everyone until she reined in her feelings.

"What's going on?" Jordan asked into the uncomfortable silence.

"They just finished surgery, he's in recovery right now," Justin told him. "The nurse will come get us when we can see him."

Marley swung around to protest, but Justin had turned to his friends.

"It could be awhile, you guys really don't have to

stay,” he said. “Though we appreciate the support.”

They rose to their feet, and Kendra gave him a hug. “Any time, Justin, you know that.”

She moved on to Jordan as the man shook their hands. Marley glanced at the clock to see how long it’d been since the doctor came out. About three minutes. A touch on her arm startled her, and she turned to find the brunette and her husband.

“I’m Kendra, this is my husband, Colton.”

Marley summoned a polite smile for the both of them, feeling like the Wicked Witch of the West. “Nice to meet you.”

“I’m glad your brother is okay,” Kendra said.

Marley nodded. “Thank you.”

She watched them leave. Colton said something, and Kendra looked up with a smile as she reached for his hand. Fierce, unexpected longing gripped Marley. The realization that she wanted *that* started her heart thumping in her chest.

Facing Justin and Jordan again, she tried to act casual. “Nice friends.”

“We’ve known Colton since high school,” Jordan said. “He and Kendra got married a few years back.”

She tried to avoid looking at Justin at the mention of marriage. It worked for about three seconds, then her gaze met his as if drawn by a magnet. He regarded her intently, making her nervous as hell. Desperately searching for something to say that would make sense, she remembered Justin’s repeated use of the word ‘we’ when he spoke of seeing Nate.

“Why are you guys here anyway?” she asked. “Company concern is great and all, but Chuck covers that.”

Justin exchanged a glance with Jordan. Her tension increased when his solemn gaze returned to her. “We know.”

The way he said it, he wasn’t referring to Chuck.

Her heart thudded hard. *Oh, God.* They'd discovered Nate's part in Karl Hunter's death. And they were here to confront him.

Her dismay turned to anger. They couldn't do this now, not after all Nate had just been through. She drew herself up stiff as a board. "You can't go in there."

Justin frowned. "Yes we can."

"No." She gave a desperate shake of her head. "I won't let you—I—"

He took her arm and propelled her away from the waiting area. She began to struggle, but realized it was useless to battle him without causing a scene. Earlier she'd welcomed his strength, now she cursed it.

"Let me go," she demanded in a furious undertone.

He swung her around and leaned close. "He's our brother, too."

Marley froze. Of course...*they knew*. Her anger extinguished as quickly as it'd flared, leaving her drained. Man, this emotional roller coaster was one helluva ride. She didn't know how much longer she could stay on.

"I see *you* know, too." Justin released her arm with the accusation.

"Nate only told me last week." She rubbed where his touch left her skin tingling. "How did you find out? Did Dale tell you or have you known all along?"

Justin snorted. "No. I overheard Nate arguing with my dad at the office after he asked me for his job back."

Marley frowned. "He didn't say anything."

"Because he doesn't know I heard. Neither does my Dad."

"Oh."

She searched her tired mind for something more to say but the nurse arrived to take them to Nate's

room. When she sternly advised they'd only have a few minutes, Chuck said a quick goodbye, promising to stop the next day after Nate had gotten some rest. Marley gave him a grateful hug and thanked him for everything before following the nurse.

Acutely aware of Justin and Jordan behind her, she entered the room with trepidation. When a hand squeezed her shoulder, she knew without looking it was Justin. As much as she knew she needed to shake him off, she couldn't make herself move any faster to escape the contact. He pulled away when she approached the bed.

"Nathan?" she whispered, reaching for her brother's hand. His pale complexion would've scared her if the doctor hadn't been so optimistic.

Nate's eyelids fluttered. He turned his head in her direction. "Mar?" His hoarse voice was barely audible.

"Yeah, I'm here."

"I...n-need...to tell you..."

She leaned closer, squeezing his fingers. "Shhh. Just rest. We can talk later."

His eyes closed again. He moved his head side to side, his hand clinging to hers weakly. "Someone was...there. He..." His voice trailed off as he took a raspy breath.

To save him the effort, Marley said, "I know, Chuck was there. He came back and found you. He said he'd stop by tomorrow."

"Not...Chuck." He opened his eyes.

She frowned. "What do you mean? Who else was there?"

He opened his mouth to speak just as Justin stepped closer to the bed. Marley saw Nate's gaze focus beyond her. His eyes widened ever so slightly. He looked even farther to the left and saw Jordan. His fingers tightened. His blue gaze returned to Marley. "What are...they doing..."

"Nate, they know. I'm sorry."

His Adam's apple jerked up, then down. "I'm tired."

Her curiosity screamed for him to answer her earlier question, but the desperate look in his eyes prompted her to nod. "Of course you are. Just rest, okay?" She looked at her watch to see it was after ten. "I'll be back first thing in the morning."

She leaned over to kiss his cheek. Before she could pull away, his left hand gripped her shoulder with surprising strength. "*Be careful.*"

Her heart leapt into her throat, propelled by the warning in his whispered words and fearful concern in his blue eyes. Be careful of what? *Or whom?*

A brisk, authoritative knock at the door drew everyone's attention. "I'm sorry," the nurse said as she strode into the room. "You'll have to leave now. He needs his rest."

Nate released Marley's arm with a final squeeze, and she straightened reluctantly. She wanted to stay with him, find out what he meant. A glance at the stern nurse told her it'd have to wait.

"I'll be by tomorrow, too," Justin said.

Marley tried to catch Nate's reaction to that statement, but the nurse got in the way as she urged them out the door. Jordan didn't say anything, but in the hall, he turned to Justin.

"He looks like Dad," he stated flatly. The undisguised dislike on Jordan's face surprised Marley.

"I can see it now, too," Justin agreed. He turned to Marley. "What was that about in there?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." Though her imagination came up with a few guesses, and she didn't like a single one of them.

"Was he working late?"

"Must've been. Chuck said he'd returned for some paperwork and found him unconscious in the

basement.”

“Did Chuck say if he saw anyone else?”

Marley shook her head. “He didn’t mention anything and I had no reason to ask.”

“I’ll call him.”

“I’ll talk to Nate in the morning,” Marley reminded him.

“We’ll talk to him together,” Justin corrected. “And I’ll still call Chuck.”

Marley began to argue, but one look at his expression, and she decided to save her breath. Wouldn’t matter anyway, she’d just get here before him tomorrow. Right now, she needed a long, hot shower and her bed. To be held in his arms again wouldn’t be so bad either, but she couldn’t go there.

“Fine. Goodnight.”

Nate’s warning echoed as she started for the exit. He’d clammed up the moment he’d seen Justin and Jordan in the room. Her mind told her one of them could be the *he* Nate referred to; instinct told her no. Still, if it wasn’t Chuck, then who’d been at the job site with Nate?

Was it possible his accident hadn’t been an accident at all? A shiver of apprehension left her chilled. Who would want to hurt Nate? And why would he warn *her* to be careful?

The disintegrated roof truss that had almost crushed her at the Forrester job site a couple weeks ago flashed in her mind. She’d never come so close to death. Could Justin have deliberately orchestrated the cable break to look like an accident? Or Jordan? And if so, why?

Hugging an arm across her front as she stepped out into the cool night air, she rubbed from elbow to shoulder with her free hand to warm herself. It didn’t help when she thought again about Jordan’s reaction to seeing Nate.

No. She didn’t want to believe it. Too many lives

had been put in danger, including Justin's. Their involvement in her accident made no sense.

*What about Nate's?*

"Marley, wait up."

Justin's voice made her flinch but she didn't slow down. He caught up a few steps later. She looked back over her shoulder for Jordan. As if reading her mind, Justin said, "Jordan went home."

She continued toward her truck. "I thought he was your ride."

"I'm going home with you."

Marley stopped. Justin took another step forward before turning to face her.

*Be careful.* Nate's warning echoed in her mind, and she lifted her chin. "Says who?"

"Says me. Says your brother," he added. When she would've argued that, he said, "I heard him in there."

"Maybe he was talking about you."

"He wasn't." His gaze didn't waver from hers.

"Easy for you to say, but I don't know that." Looking into his eyes, though, she did know. She felt it deep inside as surely as she knew her own name. Her jaw clenched in frustration as she brushed past him. "It's only been two weeks."

"You don't think you can trust me?" She heard the frown in his voice as he fell into step alongside her.

She shook her head, not to answer his question, but in denial of the feelings she refused to acknowledge. They weren't realistic after such a short period of time. "It's not long enough. It's just...not long enough," she muttered to herself.

"Marley—"

"You're not coming home with me," she said. They'd reached the driver's side of her truck, and she dug her keys out to unlock the door.

"You don't have a choice."



She whirled to face him. "Since when?"

He reached past her to open the door and while her attention focused on that move, he swiped her keys from her hand. "Now." He cut her protest short by turning her toward the truck. "Get in, I'm driving."

She resisted. "I can drive myself, thank you."

He stopped propelling her forward, but didn't let go of her arm. "Anyone can see you're exhausted and not in the best frame of mind to be behind the wheel right now."

As if she needed him to remind her how awful she looked. He was close enough for her to smell his cologne again, and she fought against inhaling the pleasant scent too deep. She looked down at his mouth, inundated with memories of his lips on hers. Quickly, she turned away.

"Nothing's going to happen unless you want it to."

It scared the hell out of her that it might already be too late for that. She climbed across the driver's side and deliberately misunderstood. "I want to go home."

She settled into her seat as he started the truck and headed out of the parking lot. Once on the road, thoughts of Nate took over. As they approached an intersection, she sat up straighter. "Turn left here."

Justin took his foot off the gas and lightly applied the brake. "That won't get you home."

"Just turn."

She knew he'd figured out where they were going when he put on the signal for the next turn that led to the Forrester construction site before she told him to.

"Who do you think was there with him?" Justin asked after a few moments. "Or do you think the anesthetic made him groggy?"

"I don't know."

He'd barely put the truck in park before she opened the door and headed toward the building. Justin met her at the front of the truck and halted her in the glare of the headlights.

Annoyance flared until he cautioned, "Slow down. Take a look around first."

She relaxed against his hold, recognizing the wisdom in his suggestion. Her gaze skimmed over the shadowed frame of the building, the darker trailer and the...

She huffed out a breath. "What am I looking for?"

He scanned the area himself. "Anything out of place, anything that looks suspicious."

She looked again. Nothing. With an impatient sound, she started forward again, toward the corner where Chuck had said Nate fell. Just past a pile of scrap lumber, she halted dead in her tracks, her gaze focused on the ground. Her heart thumped. "That's not a boot print."

Justin hunkered down for a closer inspection of the smooth-soled print in the dirt. "Looks like a man's dress shoe."

"The guys are required to wear steel-toes."

"And steel-toes have treads." Justin straightened.

"Maybe one of the paramedics?"

His skeptical expression dashed her hope. "I wouldn't think so."

"They could've been on call, but out to dinner or something...maybe?"

He only shrugged. Damn it. She wanted him to agree with her, to reassure her that someone wasn't out to hurt her brother on purpose.

No, she thought. Better to figure out and face what was happening instead of lulling herself into a false sense of security. Denial only put Nate in more danger.

They searched around a little longer but didn't come up with anything more. Back in the truck, Justin suddenly shifted from reverse to park, exited, and loped back toward the building. She watched him grab a piece of scrap lumber and had an 'ah-ha' moment when he marked off the size of the footprint on the wood before returning.

"Figured we could get a size off it, just in case." He handed the two by four to her so he could shift gears.

"Good thinking," she said, wishing she'd have thought of it. In her defense, she was tired. She'd really pushed herself on that run in hopes of being able to pass out into her bed tonight and actually sleep. It seemed a good idea at the time.

But the closer they got to the house, the more nervous she became. The last time he'd been there, she'd been ready to sleep with him. Now he'd definitely spend the night, but...

*Nothing's going to happen unless you want it to.*

Problem was, she wanted it to. Terrifyingly enough, more than she'd wanted anything in her life. But without him knowing the truth about Nate's involvement in his grandfather's death, everything became a lie. Being intimate with him under those circumstances would cheapen what they shared—dirty something that should be special.

She didn't want her first time to be contaminated by such an ugly deception.

## Chapter 18

Justin stretched out on Nate's bed, his borrowed tee shirt a bit tight, but the sweatpants were okay. Marley had directed him to Nate's room before informing him she was taking a shower, and she'd see him in the morning.

He'd stared after her, annoyance at her distant attitude mingling with disappointment. Not that he'd expected anything, but it would've been nice to sit and relax with her. Talk a little.

He rolled his eyes and shifted on the bed. *Idiot, just admit it. You were hoping to pick up where you left off last time.* Sure, hoping, but not expecting, so disappointment was allowed, wasn't it?

The noise of running water ceased, underscored by the slide of a shower door. Images bombarded him. At a time when he should be considering the strange twists in his life, he could only imagine Marley stepping from the shower. He pictured swirling steam and little rivers of water running down her body until she soaked them up with a towel.

Never in his life had he imagined he'd be jealous of a towel.

He rolled on his side, away from the wall closest to the shower, and thumped the pillow. It was going to be a long night.

The sound of the door closing across the hall drew his attention moments later. That's when it dawned on him that lying in Nate's room, with two closed doors between them, wasn't the way to go about protecting her from whatever possible danger

Nate had warned agaist.

He pushed off the bed, snatched the pillow and strode to the door. In the hall, he came face to face with Marley in a navy blue terry-cloth robe and bare feet.

He stared at her freshly scrubbed, glowing face, her wet, sexy-as-hell hair tumbling wildly over her shoulders, and wondered what she was—or wasn't—wearing underneath that robe.

"What?" she asked when he continued to stand there without saying a word.

"Nothing."

She pulled her bedroom door closed behind her and headed down the hall.

"Shouldn't you go to bed?" he asked.

Without pausing, she tossed over her shoulder, "What are you, my father?"

*Thank God, no.* He watched the sway of her hips in front of him. "It's after midnight," he pointed out, making an effort to focus his gaze elsewhere as desire began to stir things best left alone. "You should get some rest. There's a lot to do in the morning."

"I'm too keyed up to sleep."

In the kitchen, she reached to flip on the light over the stove, then took a mug from the cupboard and filled it at the sink from what he assumed was a hot water dispenser. After she selected a tea bag, she cast him a glance from under her lashes while leaning a hip against the counter.

"Don't let me keep you up."

After a look like that, sultry and innocent all rolled up in one, he was up no matter what. He shifted his weight, and the pillow, and shrugged. Her attention lowered to the pillow with a frown.

"What's that for—protection?"

He grinned even though she'd infused the question with derision. First, because currently,

that's exactly what he used it for, and second, he imagined himself beating an intruder with the feather-filled rectangle.

"I know," he said. "Not the Wade Family weapon of choice."

Her lips thinned and her jaw tightened before she turned away to reach for a plastic bear with a pointy head.

"I was kidding."

Honey streamed into her mug as she stirred the tea without a word. Then she plunked the little bear down, picked up her mug, and swept past him toward the living room. After a few steps, she swung around.

"Quit following me! You're making me nervous."

"I'm going to sleep on the couch."

Her gaze dropped to the pillow again. "What's wrong with Nate's bed?"

"Nothing. But it makes more sense for me to be on the couch if anything happens."

"Nothing's going to happen." She resumed her trek to the living room as if everything in her life was perfectly calm and normal.

"Nate was worried," he reminded her.

"I have protection."

He tossed the pillow onto the couch as she faced him from the other side of the coffee table. "Right, and I'm more effective out here, without doors separating us."

She rolled her eyes. "I meant my gun."

Ignoring the jab to his ego, he said, "A lot of good it'll do you, way out here in the closet."

Mug in one hand, she placed the other on her hip. "I moved it."

"About time."

She shook her head and started for the patio doors. "Seriously, take the bed. You'll be much more comfortable."

Justin eyed the short couch and already felt the crick that was sure to be in his neck in the morning. She might be right, but damned if he'd move back now and admit it. Besides, then it'd be like she was protecting him with that damn gun of hers. The pillow stayed on the couch.

Outside on the patio, she'd arranged wood into a teepee in the small, built-in fire pit.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Campfires relax me."

*Un-friggin-believable.* "Marley, it's prime intruder hours and here you are, offering yourself up on a silver platter. Did you not hear your brother in the *hospital* room?"

"I heard him."

"What if he wasn't alone at the job? What if it wasn't an accident? I saw the look on his face—he was really worried."

"You said that already," she snapped as she straightened. "I know. I saw his face, too. But I can't just lie in bed, staring at the ceiling in the dark thinking about all this, imagining every little noise I hear is someone coming to get me. *That* would scare me."

Abruptly, she turned away and started wadding newspaper into tight, tiny balls. So that was the problem...she wasn't as cool as she appeared. He realized he wanted to pull her into his arms and protect her himself. That's why he'd come in the first place, and why he didn't just leave her with her gun.

Instead of arguing further, he settled onto one of the reclining patio chairs arranged close to the fire pit. Once the flames caught hold of the wood, she picked up her mug and turned around. Seeing him relaxed in the chair, she pulled up short.

"What are you, a self-appointed bodyguard?"

"Something like that."

She regarded him for a long moment, then sat

on the other recliner and swung her bare feet up onto the footrest. "I quit the second time, remember? Guilt doesn't stretch that far."

"What do you know about guilt?" he retorted before he thought it out enough to control the bitterness in his voice. From the corner of his eye, he saw her head swivel in his direction and felt her gaze.

"Enough to know you don't belong here because of it."

He met her gaze and called her raise. "I like you. That a good enough reason for you?"

The rosy shower-glow on her cheeks brightened considerably, but she didn't say anything as she looked away from him toward the fire. He studied her profile before turning his attention back to the flames as well. Damn. What should've been a simple line of deflection had spiked his pulse, making it feel more like an admission.

"I suppose I should offer you some tea...or something," she said, her tone less confrontational than before.

"I don't drink tea," he said with an appropriate amount of disgust.

"Ever try it?"

He shook his head.

"Here."

She held out her mug to him. He deliberately placed his hand over hers as he took the ceramic cup from her. Her skin was soft and warm and he didn't want to break the contact. She pulled away first, but not overly fast.

Raising the mug, he turned it so he could put his mouth where he'd seen her drink. Desire shot through him with the absurd notion that the warmth that met his lips was from her mouth, not the hot liquid inside the cup.

He took a drink and choked. Handing it back



with a hoarse cough, he said, "Have a little tea with your honey, do you?"

"It's not that bad."

He loudly cleared his throat to get rid of the lingering tickle and she smiled.

"I take it you don't want any?"

"Yeah, no thanks," he assured her.

"Do you want anything else?"

Oh, sure, he wanted plenty. *What would she say to that?* He declined the offer of a drink and tried to keep his attention on the fire as his imagination started on a little road trip. It began at the tips of her bare toes, slid up the delicate arch of her foot and along the curve of her calf to...the terry cloth robe.

What did she have on under there? She hadn't even spent a minute in her room before he'd run into her in the hall. Not enough time to dress and put the robe back on. His pulse kicked up. He closed his eyes so his imagination could wander further, over her knee, across the soft silkiness of her thi—

"Did you hear that?"

He snapped his eyes open to see her peering into the darkness beyond the fire. He stared hard, straining to catch a sound, however faint. Unfortunately, he didn't hear anything beyond his overactive libido slamming the gearshift into second.

He looked back and saw the gun in her hand, partially hidden along the folds of her robe. "Shit, Marley," he exclaimed in a hushed tone. "I didn't know you had that thing on you."

She lifted her mug for a sip of tea. "Where'd you think it was?"

"I don't know—in a drawer somewhere."

"And how would that be any more effective than in the closet?" she inquired with raised eyebrows.

"You plan on sleeping with it, too?"

"Under my pillow."

Her matter of fact statement did something to him—it just happened to be the exact opposite of what he expected. Damn if he didn't find her sleeping with a gun under her pillow seductive. Whether the aura of danger, or her level of confidence with the gun turned him on, he shifted into third pretty darn fast.

"Do guns make you nervous?" she asked.

His heart pounded as if the weapon were pointed straight at him. "Considering recent events, would that be so surprising?"

"Relax. I know what I'm doing."

The fire snapped. A spray of glowing sparks skittered across the cement near Marley's chair. She jerked her feet away.

Justin sat up fast. "You okay?"

"I'm fine, nothing hit me."

Her robe had fallen partially open, revealing a lengthy expanse of one bare leg. Justin tore his gaze away to look at her face. "You really shouldn't be out here in bare feet."

She shrugged.

"What is it with you and shoes anyway?" he asked.

Her gaze swung to his. "What do you mean?"

"You used to run into work at the job site without them—not exactly smart and completely against code, I might add—and you kicked them off every chance you got at the office." He lifted his brows and waited.

"So I don't like to wear shoes. Big deal."

"No big deal." He glanced down at her feet. "In fact, they're quite nice." His gaze slid back up along the length of her body as he added in a low tone, "Like the rest of you."

She blushed again, and he waited with anticipation for her response to *that*.

"What's the deal you and guilt?"

He stiffened at her abrupt, obvious change of subject. Try as he might, he couldn't shake off the flood of images that hit him at the mere mention of the word and fought to keep his expression impassive. Her face softened in the firelight. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Obviously he hadn't been successful. He forced a smile and grabbed the first subject he could think of. "I would, however, I'm having a hard time thinking of anything but what you might not be wearing under that robe." It was half true, anyway.

Her jaw tightened even though he'd swear he saw a flicker of awareness in her eyes. "Get serious."

"You don't think I'm serious?"

She set her mug aside and stood between the chairs. The gun disappeared back in the pocket of her robe. Her slow, seductive smile threw him off balance. When she reached for the sash and began to pull the knot loose, Justin swallowed hard. He'd been trying to divert her attention good and far from the previous subject, but he hadn't expected *this*.

"Come on now, what are you doing?" He gave a half smile of his own and rose to his feet.

"You wanted to know."

"Well, yeah, but not right here." He glanced around, only to look back and discover she'd opened the robe already. "Mar—"

He caught sight of a plain white tank top and grey cotton boy shorts. Not quite what he'd imagined, but considering she wasn't wearing a bra and the material clung to her curves, he was far from disappointed.

Hands on her hips, she regarded him with raised eyebrows. "You didn't really think I'd come outside without anything on under here, did you?"

He grinned. "A guy can hope, can't he?" He reached forward, slid his palm around her hip to the small of her back, and drew her against him. The

tremor that ran through her body triggered an answering surge of desire in his. "Let's go inside."

"You're good, I'll give you that."

He didn't like the serious look in her eyes. "I've barely even started," he drawled, closing the distance between their lips.

She drew back slightly. "Sometimes it helps to talk about it."

He kept his body from stiffening in protest by focusing on the feel of her hips against his. "Talking is over-rated."

"Most of the time, I'd agree with you. But some things need to be—"

With a gentle jerk, he pulled her tight against him to cover her mouth with his. Her lips parted in surprise, giving him instant access to the soft, hot recess beyond. He got another taste of honey as she slid her tongue against his, only this time he savored it and went back for more.

In the middle of the kiss, images began to surface in his mind. With each one, his guilt rose until it completely took over desire. He gripped the firm flesh of her upper arms and set her away from him.

"Damn it, Marley. Couldn't just let me change the subject, could you?"

He paced away from the fire and stared out into the dark, fists clenched at his sides. "Couldn't just let the damn thing alone."

Not a single night sound made it through the roaring in his head. He wished she'd say something, *anything*, so he could lash out and release the emotions seething inside him. It was as if she'd poked a caged beast with a sharp stick and now the damn animal refused to lie back down.

She didn't say a word. She just stood there by the fire, waiting for him to spill his guts. He glanced over and, amazingly, felt the tightness around his

chest ease.

"It was an accident."

Marley had to strain to hear his low voice.

Then he gave a sharp, humorless snort. "God, I *hate* that word."

Afraid he'd clam up, she kept completely still as he paced back to the chairs. He motioned for her to sit before lowering himself to the end of his lounge, elbows braced on his knees. She watched his fire-lit profile as he clasped his hands firmly together, released, and clasped them again.

"I was working at Hunter during the summer while going to college, getting practical experience for after graduation."

She nodded even though he didn't look in her direction.

"I'd trained on most of the machines already, but the last was the bulldozer. I wanted to learn everything I could, as fast as I could, and I was cocky because I was good at all of it."

He stared into the fire and she noticed his knuckles whiten.

"I wasn't supposed to operate the dozer that day...the foreman had me assigned to the dump truck, but then the regular dozer guy didn't show up. Greg Johnson. I figured I knew what had to be done as well as anyone, so I jumped on up. I didn't get more than a couple haphazard swaths cleared before the foreman came over, yelling and cursing that just because I was the owner's grandson didn't mean I could do whatever I wanted and to get my ass off the machine. I saw Greg parking his truck, so I left the machine running, put on the parking brake, and climbed down."

He fell silent. Deep frown lines carved into his brow.

"I've been over it in my head a million times, and I just keep thinking that if only I'd waited...if

only I hadn't been such a cocky, know-it-all, bastard..."

She heard him swallow hard before he spoke again.

"Greg's boot caught on a root as he walked in front of the dozer, but before he could move, the machine suddenly jerked into gear and started forward. None of us could get there in time, and Greg—"

Justin's eyes squeezed shut as his emotion-roughened voice broke. "He lasted a day in intensive care before he died."

Head hung low, he drew a deep, shuddering breath. Marley shifted over to his chair and sat just behind him. She slid her arms around his waist, pressing against his back as she laid her cheek on his shoulder. Tears clogged her throat. "It was a freak accident."

"An accident." He reached a hand to wipe his eyes. His gaze remained focused on the fire. "They found the brake cable was faulty, but—"

"How can you blame yourself then?"

"If I'd done the job I was supposed to do and left the dozer alone, it wouldn't have been running when he walked in front of it."

She hugged him tighter, shaking her head against his back. "Justin, it wasn't your fault. It could've happened to anyone."

"I know that in my mind, but my heart won't accept it. I still feel responsible."

She didn't know what to say other than to repeat that it wasn't his fault. After a few minutes, he shifted free of her arms. Before she could return to her own chair, he slid back and pulled her with him. She hesitated, then gave in and relaxed against his chest, leaning her head on his shoulder. His arms held her close, crossed over her ribs, just below her breasts.

"I'm sorry I pushed," she said softly. "If I'd had any clue—"

"I've never told anyone. Not even Jordan."

Her heart swelled, the emotion inside her chest almost painful. A log shifted on the fire, dropping into the pile of coals that glowed reddish-orange. A spray of embers shot toward the night sky.

The silence between them stretched, yet it wasn't uncomfortable as night crickets, rustling leaves, and the occasional snap and crackle of the fire filled the void. Marley stroked the back of his hand, lightly playing with the golden hairs sprinkled across his skin. His fingers splayed over her ribs, the width of his hand large enough that his thumb brushed the underside of her breast through her tank top, while his pinkie finger almost reached her waist.

She closed her eyes as a wave of contentment washed over her. She could happily stay like this with him forever. Thoughts of Nate and Karl and Dale tried to intrude, but she pushed them away to concentrate on the feel of Justin's body enveloping her in its warmth.

She drew in a deep breath, and as his subtle scent filled her senses, she decided just this once she could be selfish. She would enjoy the moment and worry about life's sobering complications later.

When her eyelids drooped a few minutes later, she didn't fight sleep. Instead she snuggled deeper into his embrace and gave in to the exhaustion.

"Marley?" His voice rumbled through her body.

"Hmm."

"Thank you."

"Mm-hm." She hugged his arms tight for a moment.

"Tired?"

"Mmmm-hm."

"Want to go inside?"

“Nm-mm.”

\*\*\*\*

Justin woke with that crick in his neck but a warm body in his arms. From the look and feel of it, the fire had died out hours ago. Only a tiny curl of smoke rose lazily from the gray ashes. The first rays of the rising sun shone from behind the house, chasing the night across the mountains to the west of the city.

He would've enjoyed the scenic view laid out before him from the top of the ridge, but he had something more beautiful to look at; Marley's head pillowed on his shoulder. Waking with her in his arms made his sore neck more than worth it.

Last night had been hard and easy all in one. Hard to talk about the accident, but easy to talk to *her*. He had tried to explain a few different times to Jordan, but could never come up with the words. With Marley, he hadn't struggled for the words, they were just there. She'd offered him support from the beginning, and given comfort at the exact moment he needed it most.

He wasn't even disappointed things hadn't turned physical. That was a revelation in itself because he actively avoided relationships. This, lying here with her, simply enjoying holding her without expecting anything else, smacked of relationship like nothing he'd ever done before. It was more than a little disconcerting, but exciting at the same time.

Marley murmured in her sleep and snuggled closer. His arm had fallen asleep and after she shifted, the numbness made way for that annoying tingling sensation. A quick glance at his watch told him they should get going anyway, so he reluctantly woke her up.

Her sleep-filled eyes blinked up at him, the soft green of them drawing him in like the automatic rewind on a measuring tape. His stomach



somersaulted, and his heart started to pound.

"Morning?" Her low voice was extra sexy in its sleep roughness. After all his sappy thoughts of a minute ago, he suddenly wanted her so bad it hurt.

He cleared his throat and shifted her to a less painful position. "Yeah, it's morning."

"I s'pose it's time to get up." She stretched against him like a contented cat and Justin didn't know how much more he could take.

"We should get to the hospital to talk to Nate."

She sat up then, fully awake, and he regretted mentioning Nate so soon. He didn't like being the one to bring that look of fear to her face. But reality always had a way of intruding, and like it or not, they had to face it.

"I want to make a few calls, too." He stood after she did. "One to Chuck, and the emergency crew. I want to follow up on the possibility that one of them could've been on call like you said."

"To match the footprint."

"Exactly." He followed her inside. When she started for the kitchen, he took hold of her arm. "You want tea or coffee?"

She gave him a look of surprise. "Coffee."

"Go get ready, I'll bring you a cup." Then he grinned. "I'm guessing sugar—lots of it."

She smiled sheepishly. "Three teaspoons, no cream."

Unable to help himself any longer, he pulled her close for a kiss. He kept it brief, mindful of morning breath, then set her free and strode into the kitchen to make the coffee. He just barely kept himself from whistling.

Marley stared after him, then rushed to get dressed. She was in the bathroom with the door cracked open when he poked his head in and set her mug on the counter.

"Your sugar, ma'am."

His exaggerated drawl made her smile again as she finished twisting her hair into the ponytail holder.

"Mind if I shower?" he asked.

"Bathroom's all yours." She picked up her mug to step into the hall. She paused as he closed the door, then instead of letting her imagination go crazy, decided it'd be smarter to make breakfast. The eggs sizzled in the frying pan when she heard an appreciative groan from the doorway.

"That smells good." Justin stepped into the kitchen to fill his coffee cup. "I'm starving."

Marley couldn't help but stare. Straight out of the shower, hair toweled but not combed, with a five o'clock shadow prominent on his strong jaw, the rugged look was made for him. A few stray drops of moisture clung to his broad, bare chest, and the green towel that wrapped around his waist left a good portion of his muscled legs exposed.

Yeah, she could wake up to this man the rest of her life, no problem.

She leaned against the counter without bothering to hide her appreciation. "Breakfast is almost done."

He glanced over, caught her look, and paused. Marley felt each individual beat of her heart even after he glanced at the clock above the sink. When he looked back, disappointment edged his expression.

"I'll be back in a minute," he said in a low tone, turning to leave.

Marley watched until he disappeared, his back as sexy as the front of him. Her pulse leapt as she considered following him to the bedroom. She'd actually turned off the stove and started in that direction when the phone rang.

She jumped about a foot, feeling like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar. It was

absurd, the caller had no idea of her intentions, but she still felt herself blush as she answered the phone by the third ring.

"Is Justin with you?" Jordan's question came across none-too-friendly. "He's not answering his cell."

"He's here. He's just getting dressed." She winced at the way that sounded. "Hold on."

She started down the hall, her pulse still racing. Justin came out of Nate's bedroom, dressed in his clothes of the night before, and met her halfway. His brows rose as she handed him the phone.

"It's Jordan."

"Thought you didn't crow with the roosters?" Justin said into the phone as he followed Marley back to the kitchen. He took a seat at the square kitchen table with his coffee while she dished up their plates.

"*What?*"

Justin's shocked exclamation drew her full attention.

"Tommy Berndt? Yeah, I worked with him and his brother back in college. Tommy quit the company right before I graduated."

Marley set his food and a glass of orange juice in front of him, and then took a seat kitty-corner with her own plate. She didn't feel bad about listening. If he didn't want her to hear his conversation, he'd leave the room. It was her kitchen after all.

"This is unbelievable." Anger resonated in Justin's tone as he sat back in his chair to rake a hand through his combed hair. "Read it again...wait...once more. Let me see if I understand this...unless we agree to pay him ten thousand dollars, he's going to go to the media and tell them that Granddad's a murderer?"

Marley's fork clattered to her plate, drawing a sharp glance from Justin.

"That's bullshit. Besides, Granddad's dead. It's hearsay, an empty threat. Who'd he supposedly murder, anyway?"

Marley picked up her fork and set it next to her plate.

"Then we've got nothing to worry about. This guy's got nothing, that's why he doesn't say who." After a pause, his expression drew tighter. "I don't give a damn about what it'll look like to everyone else, Jordan...you're right—I never have—and you want to know why? Because my name is Justin Blake. Not Karl Hunter, not Dale Blake, not Jordan Blake. If people can't take me for who I am, then who the hell needs them?"

Marley almost wished she'd given him privacy. Almost. He shoved up from the table and paced to the kitchen window.

"The hell you will!" he growled into the phone. "No. Where would you even get the money? You told me the accounts are empty...no...*no*, Jordan—we will not pay that bastard blackmail money. If we pay once, all he'll do is bleed us dry. Besides, paying just makes it look like this guy's telling the truth and we're trying to hide something. If the media gets wind of *that*, it'll look twice as bad."

Marley took a bite of toast but had trouble chewing it. She washed it down with half a glass of juice. Then she pushed her plate aside and simply toyed with her fork. Thoughts of Nate taking money from Dale Blake pounded against her conscience.

"Jordan, settle down, will you?" Justin commanded. "I've got a few things to take care of this morning and then I'll come to the office and we can think this thing through. Maybe go talk to Dad and Mom and see if they have a clue what it's all about...I know...yes, I'll be there as soon as I can."

He hung up the phone and returned to the table. "Sorry."

"You don't have to apologize," she assured him as he picked up his fork. He speared a piece of sausage, lifted it halfway to his mouth, then dropped it back on his plate.

"Stupid bastard, trying to blackmail us. It's crazy—all of it. At some point things have to return to normal—right?" He looked at her. "Right?"

She wondered what he'd say if she told him about Nate's possible involvement in his grandfather's death. That wasn't normal at all. Guilt surged forward, and she kept her gaze downcast. "At some point."

"Yeah, at some point." He lifted the sausage again and took a bite. When he looked pointedly at her plate, she told him she wasn't hungry. She didn't correct him when he assumed she was worried about Nate. He was right—just not the way he thought.

On the drive to the hospital, Justin called Chuck and verified he hadn't seen anyone else at the job site the night before. He also checked if Chuck had any business meetings he'd conducted on site that day—someone dressed in something other than the customary jeans, tee shirt, and steel-toed work boots for the construction workers. Again, no dice.

At the hospital, Marley waited impatiently for the nurse to let her in to see her brother while Justin went to ask how to reach the shift supervisor for the paramedic team that had brought Nate in the night before.

Justin returned as she stood to go into Nate's room. Their eyes met, and he shook his head to her silent question. At this point, there was no logical explanation for that flat-soled footprint other than Nate's half-drugged whisper that someone else had been there.

Marley took a deep breath and pushed open the door. When Nate saw her, his expression relaxed in relief. She took his hand and forced a smile to her

face.

“You’re looking better this morning,” she said, leaning to kiss his cheek.

His gaze shifted to the opposite side of the bed.

“Hey, Nate,” Justin said. “You realize this constitutes being late for work?”

Justin’s attempt at humor didn’t even crack a smile on Nate’s face. He must really be feeling bad, Marley thought. “What exactly happened last night?” she asked point blank.

Her brother shifted slightly in his bed. “I’m not really sure how it all happened. It’s a little fuzzy.”

Marley noticed he avoided looking at Justin, and her stomach churned all of a sudden. “You said someone was there.”

“I don’t remember...”

Marley stepped closer to the bed with the same feeling of dread that she’d gotten the night he’d told her about Karl Hunter. “Who was there, Nate?”

## Chapter 19

Nate stared straight ahead. Impatience gnawed at Justin, and he leaned on the bedrail.

"We went to the site," he told Nate. "We found footprints that didn't belong—someone wearing dress shoes, or something with a flat sole. It's obvious you know something, so who was it?"

Nate turned his head to Justin. A spark of defiance lit his eyes even as he swallowed hard. "At first I thought it was you."

"What?" Marley exclaimed as the same disbelief exploded inside Justin.

"But then I saw your twin and things were already so blurred...I'm not sure who it was anymore."

Nate's implication became clear, and Justin fought a surge of anger. "Jordan would never do something like this."

"Why would you even think Jordan would try to hurt you?" Marley asked Nate.

"I didn't get a good look at the guy," Nate defended before zeroing in on his sister to add pointedly, "Whoever it was."

"Justin didn't do it."

Marley's adamant defense gave Justin a feeling of relief that shouldn't matter as much as it did.

"How do you know?" Nate asked Marley.

Her gaze shifted to meet Justin's. He got another jolt when he saw an absolute conviction in her eyes that matched her voice. "Because I know."

Then it dawned on him that she didn't jump to Jordan's defense and he got pissed off all over again.

"Jordan didn't do it either." Her gaze wavered and he saw her doubt. "That's something *I* know."

"He doesn't like Nate. That was more than clear last night."

Justin's hands clenched on the rail. Anger vibrated his body. "He didn't do it."

They stared at each other across the bed. Then he saw something flash in her eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. When she would've averted her gaze again, Justin forced her to hold his.

"What? You might as well say it."

She hesitated, then lifted her chin. "You all look remarkably like Dale."

Justin shoved up straight. "So that's how it's going to be. Let's just accuse my whole damn family while we're at it. Hell, my sister Cassie has blonde hair, maybe she did it."

"All I'm saying is that—"

"You're saying that my father—" He pointed a finger at Nate as he glared at her. "*—his* father, tried to kill him."

"I'm saying that Nate's not sure who was there, and Dale can't be ruled out," Marley insisted. "For God's sake, Justin, he gave Nate fifteen thousand dollars to keep his mouth shut about being his son. What kind of a person does that?"

"A cowardly bastard. But it doesn't mean he's capable of murder."

But as the seconds ticked by, he began to think of the things he'd learned about his father in the past few weeks. Turned out his father was capable of a lot more than he'd ever thought possible.

He paced to the window, only to swing back around as a question occurred to him. Leaning against the sill, he crossed his arms over his chest. "Let's just say for one crazy, completely impossible second that Jordan or my father was there. Why?"



He gestured with one hand as he watched Nate. "Why would either of them do this to you?"

Nate held his gaze for a moment, then dropped his eyes. "Because of what happened with Karl."

Marley's sharp intake of breath drew Justin's attention in time to see panic cross her face. She stared at Nate, who glanced from her, back to Justin.

"But she told you he was still alive when I left that day...didn't you?" Nate looked back at his sister.

Justin pushed away from the window and strode back to the bed. Marley shook her head, raising a hand to press against her forehead. He stared hard at her as the pieces began to fall into place. The expression of misery on her face made him sick. "She didn't tell me a damn thing."

"But..." Nate's gaze swung back to Marley, his face ashen. "You said they knew."

Marley shook her head with anguished resignation. "They knew about you being their half-brother. That's why they were here last night."

"What happened with my grandfather?" Justin demanded. Marley met his look without flinching, but didn't say a word. It was Nate who spoke, explaining what had happened that afternoon.

"Son-of-a-bitch," Justin ground out. "You've got some nerve accusing my brother and father of coming after you after what you've done."

Nate tried to sit up, but slumped back down with a gasp. "Marley said he had a heart condition...that the paper said—"

Justin focused back on her. "You say a lot these days, just not what counts. Where's that honesty you're so proud of?"

That struck a nerve. But despite the guilt in her expression, she retorted, "Karl Hunter was no saint—what with his secrets and threats. He knew

about Nate all along but never said a single word.”

“That’s not the issue here,” Justin argued. “A lie of omission is still a lie.”

“Don’t you dare judge me, Justin *Blackman*.”

Their voices had steadily risen, and with Marley’s last words, the door to the room was thrust open.

“What is going on in here?” a nurse exclaimed in a stern undertone. “He’s supposed to be resting.”

Justin stepped back out of the woman’s way. It was either that or be shoved aside as she checked the monitors next to the bed. She made a sound of annoyance and pointed to the door. “Out. Both of you.”

Marley’s mouth opened in protest. “But—”

“Now!”

Justin directed a look at Nate. “This isn’t done.”

Before Nate could speak, Marley bent down close. “I’ll take care of it. You get some rest and don’t worry.”

Justin waited for her just outside the room. She swept past him without a word, and he ground his teeth in annoyance. Halfway down the hall he caught her arm, but she yanked free and kept walking. Short of forcibly restraining her right there in the middle of the hospital, Justin had no choice but to follow.

“How exactly do you plan to take care of it?” he asked when they reached the main level of the hospital. “Gonna turn yourself in and take the fall for him?”

She didn’t answer.

“Actually, that’s something I’d like to see. You on the stand, under oath. It’d be interesting to see which way you went with the story.”

She shoved out the door before whirling to face him in the bright morning sun. “Don’t you dare question my integrity. I quit a job I loved because I

couldn't face you every day knowing what Nate might have done."

"You have integrity confused with guilt," he accused. "You couldn't face me because you knew it was wrong."

He saw he'd hit the nail so dead center, he sunk it with one blow.

"What should I have done?" she asked. "Turn in my own brother for something that I'm not a hundred percent convinced he's responsible for?"

Her vehemence drew the curious glances of people near the entrance. He lowered his voice and said, "It needs to be investigated. If it was his fault..."

"He's your brother, too."

"What would you have me do, just let it go?"

When she didn't reply, he figured that's exactly what she wanted him to do—until he saw her face. The misery in her expression convinced him that while she didn't want Nate to get in trouble for what he'd done, the integrity she'd spoken of wasn't so sure that would be right, either.

He was torn. So many emotions churned just below the surface that he didn't know which way to turn, or which one to deal with first. Grief for the loss of his granddad and the desire for justice warred directly with anger for the lost years he should've had with his half-brother and his sympathy for Marley's distress.

Yet a sharp sense of betrayal lingered. She'd known about his granddad and not said a word. It didn't matter that he knew why she'd done it. Or that on some level he understood her motivation. Most likely he would've done the same thing in her shoes. So why did it still hurt?

"It's not my decision alone to make," he finally stated, pivoting as he pulled keys from his pocket.

"That's my truck. Where do you think you're

going?”

He glanced back to where she stood near the tailgate, hands on her hips, a challenging glint in her eye. *She'd known and hadn't told him.*

“Wherever I damn well please. Come along or don't. Right about now, I really don't care.”

Justin climbed into the driver's seat. He'd started the engine and shifted into reverse before the passenger side opened, forcing him to apply the brake. She slammed the door and put on her seatbelt, but didn't say a word as he drove to the offices of Hunter Construction.

Once there, some perverse urge had him pocketing the keys again. He felt her glare as she followed him up to the third floor.

“Jordan in his office?” he asked Bonnie without pausing his stride.

“Yes,” he heard her say to his back. “Morning, Marley,” she added in a curious tone.

Marley replied, but her footsteps dogged his all the way. Justin didn't bother to knock and left the door for her to close as he met Jordan's surprised, then relieved, then tense gaze. Justin didn't flinch when the door slammed behind him, but his brother did.

“What's she doing here?” Jordan's tone was the exact opposite from last week when he'd been alarmed that she'd quit.

“He stole my truck,” Marley stated.

Jordan frowned. Justin lifted a shoulder. Technically, he couldn't argue that. “Let's see the note.”

Jordan opened a drawer to his right, took out a piece of paper and stood to hand it to him. As Justin read it, Jordan walked over to a side cupboard. “Want one?”

“One what?” Justin asked as he studied the note. He looked up to see Jordan holding out a glass,

half filled with amber-colored liquid.

"What the hell is that?" he asked. Then he glanced at his watch. "Crissakes, Jordan, it's not even ten o'clock."

Jordan downed the drink in one gulp, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He poured another one and lifted it while pointing his index finger at Justin. "You have no idea what this could do to us all—to the family—to the company."

"There's no sense getting drunk over it. Nothing's going to happen." He cast a glance toward where Marley had plunked down in a chair with her arms crossed. Why hadn't he just given her the damn keys?

"If this gets out, the bad publicity will destroy us," Jordan continued. "We'll lose the Jenkins project, the company will go bankrupt for sure, and we'll lose everything."

He downed his second shot and Justin felt a prick of alarm. He'd never seen his brother like this before. "In the grand scheme of things, it doesn't matter, Jordan."

"To you," Jordan accused. "You still have your job back in Toronto. I actually quit mine, remember?"

When Jordan would've poured a third drink, Justin stood and grabbed the whiskey decanter from his hand. "Enough. There's a lot we have to figure out and you being drunk won't help anything."

Jordan braced both hands against the counter. He hung his head. "I'm fine."

"Good, because there's one thing we need to get cleared up right now. Where were you last night?"

Justin felt Marley's gaze as Jordan straightened. "I went home."

"I mean before the hospital," Justin clarified.

"I was at Club 9. You know that—you called me there."

"I would assume you can get witnesses to confirm that?"

Marley shifted in her seat. "Justin—"

He silenced her with an upraised hand. She and Nate had made the accusation, she would listen to this.

"What the hell is this about?" Jordan glanced at Marley.

"Our brother Nate is under the impression that one of us pushed him last night," Justin explained.

Jordan's expression hardened. "Are you asking if I did it?"

"Give me some fricken credit, man," Justin said. "It's for her."

Jordan directed his gaze back to Marley, and Justin watched her meet his brother's look without flinching. She never backed down or made excuses, he'd give her that. But then he found himself making them for her.

"She doesn't know you like I do. She thinks you don't like Nate."

"I don't," Jordan stated. "He's going to screw up all our lives."

"Jordan—"

Marley surged to her feet, surprising Jordan by getting right up in his face. "Don't go blaming Nate for this. It's not his fault your father screwed around."

"And your mother's a saint?" Jordan snapped.

"My mother's dead, so I can't really answer that, now can I? Maybe we should ask your dad. The stand-up guy who kept his son a secret all these years and then when the truth came out, gave him money to keep his mouth shut."

The two of them stared at each other for a long, tense moment; Marley's jaw set hard, Jordan's hands clenched tight at his sides. Jordan looked away first.

“What do we do about this Berndt guy?” he asked Justin.

Justin looked at the note again. “Let’s set up a meeting—”

“You’re going to pay the blackmail?” Marley exclaimed with surprise.

“Hell no.” He glanced at her, then at Jordan. “I want to see what proof he has.”

Jordan nodded. “I’ll find his number and set it up for later today.”

“Make it tomorrow. Let him sweat it out a little.”

Jordan shot him a look. “I have a feeling I’m the only one sweating anything right now.”

“It’ll be fine.” Funny how, only a few weeks ago, Jordan had told *him* to lighten up, that everything would work out.

“I’ve got a meeting on the other side of town, but I need to get my Jeep first. You okay to drive me back to the apartment?” Jordan nodded, so Justin took Marley’s keys out of his pocket and tossed them to her.

She caught them with one hand. “You mean I’m free to go now?”

“So it would appear.”

She hesitated, eyeing the bottle of booze on the counter. “I can give you a ride.”

Jordan bristled. “I’m *fine*.”

She ignored him and said to Justin, “It’s not like I have to rush back to work or anything.”

After a final glance at Jordan, Justin lifted a shoulder. “Let’s go, then, I’ve got a lot to do today.”

He strode to the door but stood aside for her to precede him. Jordan grabbed the door from Justin’s hand. “I’m not drunk, you know.”

“I didn’t say you were. It’s no—”

He stopped mid-sentence when he saw his father’s office door open and his mother stepped out.

He and Jordan exchanged glances as she walked toward them, followed by Dale. Justin saw his mother glance at Marley and do a double take. Her eyes narrowed as she approached them by Jordan's office. Her chin jutted out, and she turned her sharp hazel gaze toward him and Jordan.

"Mom, what a surprise," Jordan spoke first.

"Good morning boys," she said in her best I'm-in-public-with-people-watching voice. She stopped in front of them, her head tilted ever so slightly. Jordan stepped up and dutifully kissed the nearest cheek, drawing a twisted smile from Justin. Then she turned her gaze toward him and waited.

He shoved his hands in his pockets. "Slumming today, Mom?"

Marley's brows rose before she could help it. Justin's mother's smile didn't fade, but her laugh contained a brittle edge. Marley fidgeted, uncomfortable witnessing Justin's open hostility toward the woman.

Then she turned her piercing gaze on Marley. Marley stiffened and drew herself up to her full height. She decided about the only thing the twins had gotten from their mother were their eyes; the rest came from Dale.

Mrs. Blake might have been pretty at one time, but now a bitter veneer sharpened the angles of her face in a most unattractive way.

"I apologize for my son's rudeness," the woman said, her cultured tone a stark contrast to the flinty gleam in her eyes. "I'm Diana Blake."

Despite the uneasiness working its way through her, politeness dictated Marley accept the woman's outstretched hand. "Marley Wade." She pulled free as soon as she could.

"Wade...why does that name sound familiar?" Diana paused as if trying to recall, but Marley had the distinct impression it was all an act. "Oh, yes.



You look just like your mother. She was very beautiful.”

Her pulse jerked. Justin’s mother had known hers, too? Did she know about the affair between her husband and Annette Wade? *Did she know about Nate?* Marley cast a quick glance at Dale, but he avoided her gaze. Jordan just glared at her. Justin watched his mother, who gave nothing else away.

“So I’ve been told,” Marley replied. A defensive note had crept into her voice and she discovered she wanted nothing more than to get out of there. Normally, she didn’t run from confrontations, but this woman chilled her clear through.

Justin stepped forward. “We were just on our way out.”

It felt like a rescue when he placed his hand against the small of Marley’s back and guided her past his parents. Diana’s sharp gaze pierced her back like a knife. Marley shivered. Something told her Diana knew everything.

“Sorry,” Justin said as they rode the elevator down. “I shouldn’t have provoked her.”

“You don’t have to apologize. In fact, I should thank you for not saying anything about Nate and your grandfather.”

He waited for her to exit first. “Didn’t seem a good idea to add more to Jordan’s plate right now, but I still have to tell him at some point.”

She nodded her understanding, because, truly, she did. As they crossed the parking lot, she handed her truck keys back to him. “You know where you’re going.”

“What are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“I’ll probably go back to see Nate for awhile. Tell him about Jordan,” she added in an apologetic tone. “Maybe see if he remembers anything else.”

He nodded. “I’ll be done around six. You want me to pick up dinner on my way over?” He was

obviously extending his own olive branch.

“Who says you’re coming over?” She wanted to remain angry for the things he’d accused her of earlier, but didn’t quite pull it off.

“Marley, until we know who and why, you’re not staying alone.”

The firm statement would’ve raised her hackles if the entire morning hadn’t been just strange enough that him spending the night again sounded reassuring.

“Don’t worry about dinner,” she relented. “I’ll cook.”

His expression softened, too. “I’ll bring dessert.”

She wanted him for dessert. Could she tell him to just bring himself?

\*\*\*\*

Marley jerked awake, her hand closing around the grip of her Glock.

“Easy, Jessie.”

At the sound of Justin’s voice from behind the couch, she rolled onto her back and blinked up at him with confusion. “Jessie?”

“As in James?” he said dryly. “I figured you had your gun somewhere—ah, there it is. Would’ve been smarter to lock the damn door.”

She sat up with a yawn and placed the weapon on the coffee table so she could rub her dry, aching eyes. “I wasn’t planning to fall asleep.”

“Marley, that’s something you have to start remembering to do the moment you come in.”

“I was working on the porch earlier—going in and out—it didn’t make sense to lock it right away.”

A glance at her watch made her eyes widen. Almost seven! Her couple minute rest break had turned into a two-hour snooze. She stood, stretching her arms high above her head as she turned around. Cool air whispered across her stomach where her shirt hiked up.

Justin stood midway between the living room and the kitchen, a bag in each hand, staring at her. The warmth in his gaze chased away the chill. When their eyes met, there was no mistaking the desire that reached across the room to stroke her pulse. She lowered her arms, made herself breathe, and walked toward him.

“What’s that?” She indicated his purchases.

He held up one bag, then the other. “Dessert. Wine.”

Caught in the heat of the moment, she raised an eyebrow and lowered her tone. “You wouldn’t be planning to liquor me up so you can take advantage of me, would you?”

A slow smile spread across his face as she approached. “Would it work?”

Her stomach flipped in anticipation. She shrugged a shoulder and pretended indifference on her way by. “Maybe.”

She heard the clink of wine bottles and bags dropping to the floor. When he caught her from behind and whirled her around, she couldn’t contain a startled laugh. His mouth wasted no time finding hers as he pulled her against him.

Moments later, he started down the hall toward her bedroom without breaking the hungry kiss.

They were forgetting something...weren’t they? She drew in a much needed lungful of air and distantly recognized the smell of her simmering spaghetti sauce. Oh, yeah. “Umm...dinner—”

“Can wait,” he said against her lips.

It probably could, but should she be this...easy? His mouth left hers and when he focused his attention on her neck, her knees went weak. Good thing his arms supported her. With her senses reeling, she felt obligated to try again. “The wine—”

“Don’t need it.” He nipped the sensitive skin just below her ear, and then kissed away the non-

existent pain. "Do you?"

She shook her head, overwhelmed by how much she wanted him right now. He reclaimed her mouth while kicking her bedroom door open wider. She smiled against his lips as the door banged into the wall, but before he could walk her through, a heavy knock sounded at the front door of the house.

They both stilled. Justin groaned. "You've got to be kidding me." He leaned his forehead against hers and drew in a deep breath. She began to pull away to answer the door, but he caught her arm. "I'll get it."

Marley straightened her shirt as she followed him into the living room. Justin looked out the window first, then stalked over to swing open the door. "What the hell are you doing here?"

## Chapter 20

Jordan brushed past without any invitation to enter. After only a glance in Marley's direction, he turned back to face Justin. "Dad paid."

Still annoyed at having been interrupted, Justin frowned in confusion. "What?"

"He paid the blackmail."

Justin narrowed his gaze on his brother. "Why'd you tell him? I thought we hadn't completely agreed—"

"I didn't say a word. Apparently, Berndt covered his bases and we all got a copy of the note. Yours was in the mail on your desk," he added.

Justin turned away, running a hand through his hair. "I don't get it. Why would he pay the money? I sure wish I knew what the hell was going on around here."

"Maybe he knows something," Marley said from where she stood near the couch.

Justin swung around to face her, ready to deny it. She met his look without apology. Then she tucked the gun from the coffee table into the back waistband of her jeans, and moved forward to pick up the grocery bags he'd dropped earlier.

Jordan shifted uneasily beside him. "I wondered the same thing."

Justin looked back at his brother, feeling like he might get whiplash. "Do you really think Granddad did something—that he could've killed someone?"

Jordan sighed as he lifted his hands, palms up. "Why else would Dad pay?"

Justin had no idea. He didn't want to believe his

grandfather could have actually murdered someone. Or that his father would help cover it up. But considering the fact that his father had ignored Nate all these years, and taken money from Karl Hunter for doing so, it wasn't such a stretch of the imagination. Maybe the money he'd paid Nate to stay out of their lives was also part of this mystery.

He watched Marley in the kitchen, unpacking the cheesecake assortment he'd brought and three bottles of wine; red and white since he didn't know what she'd planned for dinner, and a dessert wine for after. So much for a simple, distracting evening of getting to know her better.

He directed his attention back to Jordan. "How did you find out about this?"

"When I called to set up the meeting, Berndt said he met with Dad this afternoon. Thought it was funny that I wanted proof against Granddad after 'we' already paid."

Justin shook his head. "You watch—this isn't the last we've heard from him. He'll be back as soon as the money's gone."

"What else could we do?" Jordan demanded. "You know as well as I do that the moment we go to the police, the story will hit the news. If it comes out that the founder of Hunter Construction was a murderer, we'll lose it all. People don't want to do business with relatives of murderers any more than the murderer himself."

Justin paced to the patio doors and back. "I don't want to believe Granddad did anything, but I've thought a lot about this since this morning and I've got to face the facts. Look at where the company is now. If you consider the jobs we have out there, there is no reason for Hunter to be in any financial trouble. My guess is Granddad was already being bled dry, and if we continue to pay, it'll only be a matter of time before it's all gone—no matter how

successfully we rebuild the business.”

Jordan’s jaw clenched and he looked outside. After a minute, he said quietly, “I hate it when you’re right.”

“In this case, so do I,” Justin agreed.

“So what, we let the guy know this is it, then? Call his bluff?”

Justin thought for a moment. “Let’s see if he’ll still meet and see what he’s got—if anything. We might consider going public ourselves. It could be a lot less damaging if we’re the ones to release the facts as we currently know them.”

Jordan looked horrified at the thought. Justin wondered if his brother would ever get past the matter of appearances being everything. However this all played out, he suspected neither of them would have much choice in the matter before too long.

“Dinner’s on the table,” Marley said from the kitchen table.

Jordan glanced at his watch. “I should get going.”

Marley set a bowl of spaghetti noodles on the table. “I set a place for you, Jordan. You’re welcome to stay.”

Jordan cast him a glance. Justin smiled wryly at the silent request for permission. As if he’d chase his own brother out.

\*\*\*\*

Three hours later, he wanted to chase his own brother out. While he and Marley each had a glass of wine with dinner, and another half-glass of the dessert wine with the cheesecake, Jordan finished off the first bottle and almost the second when they moved to the living room to watch TV. He was close enough to drunk that Justin knew he couldn’t let him drive home.

It occurred to him that Jordan had been

drinking more than usual, but Justin had attributed it to the stress of the past couple weeks. Jordan would ease up once things returned to normal.

Justin rose from the couch and made his way into the kitchen. The pot of coffee he'd started had begun to percolate when Marley joined him and leaned back against the counter.

Thinking about Nate's interruption the other night, and Jordan's tonight, Justin gave her a rueful smile. "Brothers and their timing, hey?"

A quick smile touched her lips, but it faded just as fast. "Does he always drink like this?"

Justin went straight on the defense. "He's not a drunk."

"I didn't say he was, but you can't let him drive."

Justin indicated the dripping coffee. "What do you think this is for?"

"Why don't you just have him sleep in Nate's room," she suggested.

"Because..." He walked over to place a hand against the counter on either side of her as he leaned in close. "I don't want him here tonight."

Her breath hitched, sending a swift stab of desire through Justin. "Oh."

"Yeah, oh."

He placed a soft kiss on her lips, intending to leave it at that and return to the living room. But she wrapped her arms around his neck, opened her mouth under his, and stroked her tongue deep inside.

He tasted mint and smiled when he realized she'd snuck into the bathroom to brush her teeth after dinner. Mindful of the garlic bread he'd eaten, he'd fished his toothbrush and mouthwash from his overnight bag and done the same. Good to know they were on the same page.

He followed her lead with the kiss, letting her control the speed as he fit her body tight against his.



His hands memorized the line of her spine and the firm curves of her butt. He lost himself in her passion until the gurgling of the coffee pot signaled completion.

Burying his face in her neck while he fought to regain control, Justin asked, "How fast do you think a cab can get here?"

"Not fast enough," she said breathlessly.

He laughed and groaned at the same time. "God, Marley, you drive me nuts."

She pushed him away to reach for some mugs. "Good, that makes us even."

Sidling up behind her, he lifted the hair off her neck and placed his lips against her soft skin. Her head lolled to the side. She moaned softly when he slid his hands under her shirt and bra to cup her breasts.

"Call the cab company already," she ordered in a hoarse voice.

"Right, okay. I'm on it."

He withdrew his hands reluctantly. When she walked past him at the phone with three cups of coffee, his gaze followed her until she was out of sight. After a few more rings, someone answered on the other end. "Yellow Cab, how may I help you?"

"I need a pick up at six-twenty—"

He broke off as Marley returned, shaking her head. "Hang up."

He lifted a brow, but she just reached to remove the phone from his hand, then spoke into the handset. "I'm sorry, we don't need a pick up after all. Bye."

She jerked her head toward the living room. When they reached the couch, Justin wanted to shout in frustration at the sight of his twin brother, sound asleep, snores emanating from his slack mouth.

"I'm beginning to wish I were an only child," he

grouched. That earned him a smack on the arm. "I'm kidding," he tacked on. "Mostly."

Jordan mumbled and started to roll over with his half-empty wine glass in hand. Marley lunged for it, and Justin took hold of his arm to haul him to his feet. With Marley's help, he carried Jordan down the hall and laid him on Nate's bed, removed his shoes, then covered him with the comforter.

Snagging the other pillow and a blanket off the end of the bed, Justin closed the door behind him to face Marley in the hall. She glanced down at the bedclothes in his arms.

"It's late."

He looked at his watch to distract himself from the vision of her. "In the world of construction, it's really late."

She took a step toward her room. "I guess I'll see you in the morning then?"

The hesitancy in her words tore right through him. He had to clear his throat before he could reply, "Goodnight."

He started down the hall, silently cursing his brother to hell and back.

"Justin?"

His heart leapt as he stopped without turning around. "Marley, don't," he said gruffly. "One more word and it's not going to matter one bit that Jordan's in the next room."

He held his breath in the ensuing silence. When he heard the soft click of her door, disappointment flooded through him. After changing into a pair of shorts and tee shirt, he made a quick round of the house to secure each entry. He dumped the coffee and left the light on above the stove before making his way into the living room to park his butt on the couch.

Only the hum of the refrigerator and ticking of a clock in the kitchen broke the silence of the night.

Justin lay first with his eyes closed, then open, slowly tuning in to the creaks and groans of the house.

Hours seemed to pass as comfort and sleep eluded him. Staring into the dark, he heard the sound of the increasing wind through the trees and around the corners of the house. Already on edge from the events of the past few days, and the repressed sexual desire thrumming through his veins, the noises kept him awake.

An extended creak from the back of the house made him tense. It almost sounded like a door opening slowly. Silence followed. Just when he'd started to relax, the lightest scuff of a footstep on the hardwood floor sent a rush of adrenaline straight to his nerve endings.

He rolled off the couch, his pulse pounding in his ears. A dark figure, haloed by the meager light from the kitchen, headed toward the couch. It registered that the slim shadow was Marley a split second before she whispered his name.

"Justin. You're awake."

"Hell, yes, I'm awake." He met her halfway around the couch. Her face remained in shadow, and he gripped her arms. Concern threatened to overwhelm him. "What's the matter? Did you hear something? Was someone—"

"No," she hastily assured him. "Everything's fine."

"Then what...?"

"I can't sleep."

He stared a moment. "But you're okay? Everything—"

"Is fine."

Relief gave way to frustration. "You damn near gave me a heart attack."

"Sorry," she said in the meekest tone he'd ever heard from her. Now he knew something was

definitely wrong.

"It's almost one in the morning. If nothing's wrong, then what are you doing up?"

She moved around him and plopped down on the couch. "What part of *'I can't sleep'* don't you understand?"

He stared for a moment. About all he understood at this point was she didn't seem immediately concerned about anything, and she wore another sexy tank top and shorts like the night before. He sat, careful to keep his distance and not let his bare knee touch hers. Any contact at this point was liable to drive him past the point of no return.

With a deep, silent breath, he strove to think of something—anything—else.

"I owe you an apology," she said softly. "I should've told you about Nate and your grandfather right away."

Well, there was a change of subject. He waited for all the reasons why she hadn't, her justification to convince him it wasn't her fault, but they never came. She left him free to make up his own mind and it didn't take him long to figure out how he felt.

"I've thought about that a lot today. I understand why you didn't tell me, and I don't blame you—not anymore, anyway." He looked over at her. "I'm sorry I got so angry. I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"It's not an easy situation no matter how we look at it."

"You can say that again."

He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the couch. So much had happened since that first day at the Forrester site. He'd gone in suspecting her in his granddad's death only to find out the M.A.R. most likely indicated her deceased father and if anyone in their family was guilty, it

was Nate. His own half-brother.

Definitely a lot to deal with, and yet he couldn't deny a sense of relief knowing she was innocent.

After a few minutes, she asked, "Are we okay, then?"

He smiled toward the ceiling. "Yeah, we're good."

When he felt and heard her move beside him, he started to glance over. Before he knew it, she'd kneeled on the couch, then swung a leg across to straddle his lap while she placed her hands on his shoulders.

He stared into her face, lit by the dim light from the kitchen, and swallowed hard as he brought his hands up to rest on her hips. With effort, he kept from sliding them up underneath the material of her shirt. She leaned forward, pressed her lips to his, and then teased his mouth open with her tongue.

Senses reeling, Justin returned the kiss and gave in to the desire to find out just how soft the skin at her waist was. Big mistake. Once he started touching, he didn't want to stop. Before he lost complete control of his sanity, he pulled back and waited until she lifted her lashes. The desire in her radiant green eyes nearly undid him right there, but he managed to voice the reason he hesitated. "What about Jordan...?"

She blinked, then gave a low, husky laugh. "Are you seriously telling me that your brother—who's down the hall with the door closed, *passed out*, is going to keep this from happening?"

Yeah, it sounded weak to him, too, but respect for her made him willing to wait.

Uncertainty entered her expression. "If you don't want to..."

He gave a short laugh and lifted his hips up to meet hers. "That should completely answer *that* question." He would've sworn she blushed as he

reluctantly eased back down, but it didn't go with her aggressive actions of the past few minutes.

"I don't give a damn about Jordan," he explained. "But I thought it might bother you."

She relaxed, opening her knees wider until she rested firmly on top of him. "Does it feel like it bothers me?"

His ability to respond was reduced to a low growl deep in his throat. He surged forward to capture her mouth again. He pushed his hands back under the stretchy tank top, impatient for the feel of her naked skin against his.

Urging her arms up, he stripped her top off. Then he turned his attention to her small, firm breasts, experimenting until he discovered exactly what would elicit the soft moans of pleasure that made him want her all the more.

Marley couldn't stand it. She fisted her hands in his shirt and dragged it over his head. Immediately, she missed his mouth on her breast, but took the opportunity to do her own exploration. The faint tang of salt on his skin teased her taste buds.

His masculine scent raised her level of arousal, intensifying the throbbing deep inside her. He shifted their positions to lay her on the couch and she felt his fingers at the waistband of her shorts. She lifted her hips so he could remove them, while at the same time, she silently acknowledged her nervousness.

Her heart threatened to beat right from her chest and it amazed her that she'd come out here at all. She'd heard over the years that the first time was painful, but besides the ache inside her, she didn't see how anything that felt this wonderful could hurt.

Justin positioned her on the edge of the couch and knelt before her. She stiffened, having no idea what to expect. His hazel eyes begged her trust in a

way words had no hope of conveying. When his touch moved up along her inner thighs, she released her tense muscles and put herself in his hands.

It turns gentle and passionate, he used his hands and mouth to drive her completely wild in a way she'd never expected. Pleasure reached an almost unbearable pitch when suddenly her world disintegrated in an explosion of sensation. When she felt she could speak, she whispered, "Oh my God."

"Yeah," Justin's low voice agreed. "And that was just the appetizer."

Marley opened her eyes to find him watching her. Self-conscious warmth rushed through her. He'd made her lose complete control. She may have even screamed.

He began to kiss his way up her body, spreading heat of a different kind. Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples super sensitive as he swirled his tongue around each one before sucking it deep into his mouth. Need built deep in her core again. She pulled him up, fusing their mouths together in a hot, wet kiss.

The hard press of his erection reminded her there was more to this than what he'd already given her. Would her mouth offer him the same pleasure? When he removed the rest of his clothes, she skimmed a hand down his chest. An attempt to follow her hand's trail with her mouth had her scooting farther down on the couch. Curious anticipation built as she wondered if she could make him scream.

Justin groaned at the erotic brush of her lips against his chest. Her hand slid lower and his stomach muscles seized. "Marley, I don't know if—"

Her hand closed around him. His breath caught in his throat and he abruptly stopped talking. He managed to allow two strokes of her palm along his length before he desperately reached to drag her

hand away. Watching her fall apart had put him too close to the edge.

She resisted with a faint sound of protest. "Justin—"

"I've wanted you for too long. I've got to be inside you. *Now.*"

He covered her mouth with his while digging into his bag beside the couch for his pants from earlier. After securing a condom, a brief break from her kiss allowed him to tear it open. His lips found hers again while he finished with the protection and positioned himself between her legs.

His attempt to take it slow was derailed when her hips rose to meet him. One deep thrust buried him to the hilt in her slick, welcoming heat. Her sharp inhale registered at the same moment shock reverberated through his body. He lifted his head, staring into her wide eyes.

*She was a virgin?*

His chest tightened to the point it became painful to breathe. He held still, afraid he'd hurt her already and not wanting to increase her pain. The fit between them was so tight, pressure throbbed in his groin and radiated throughout his tense body.

Silently, she shifted beneath him. *God.* He should pull out. He'd had no clue, never would've guessed he'd be her first. She moved again, lifting her hips. He groaned. Eased his hips back, but then couldn't help pushing forward again. The soft sound from her lips made him pause.

"Again," she said.

He did.

*"Mmm."*

"Does it hurt?"

"Not anymore. Please, don't stop."

He began to move slowly, as he'd first intended. It didn't take long before her breath came in short, labored puffs. She urged him faster and harder,



lifting her hips to meet his with each thrust, her instinctive rhythm in perfect sync with his.

Her uninhibited passion snapped his control, though he managed to hold his own release until a moment after she screamed his name for the second time that night.

\*\*\*\*

Marley woke slowly, stretching under the blanket that'd been tucked so thoughtfully around her. That's when she realized she was alone on the couch. Eyes still closed, she smiled her contentment even though she was sore in places she'd never been sore in before.

Ask her if she cared.

The sex had been amazing. *He* was amazing. With the exception of a brief flash of pain, making love with Justin was everything she'd hoped for and like nothing she'd imagined. He was gentle, considerate, rough, and passionate, each at exactly the right time. She'd found herself incapable of rational thought or coherent speech as he held her in his arms after completely altering her universe. Sleep had claimed her before the world shifted back on its axis.

Finishing her stretch, she sat up, wondering where he'd gone. Through the window by the front door, she saw the red tint of a crimson sunrise. The kitchen was empty. Then she heard water running in the bathroom.

Mmm...a hot shower sounded great. Maybe she could go in and surprise him? With a grin, she wrapped the blanket around her and made her way to the bathroom. Her hand turned the doorknob when she noticed that farther down the hall, Nate's bedroom door stood open.

Her eyes widened. *Shit!* What if it was *Jordan* in the shower? Marley abandoned the bathroom door and bolted for her room. Whoever was in the shower,

she didn't want Jordan to find her in the hall wearing nothing but a blanket.

Once inside her room, she leaned against the closed door and let her head bang back in relief. Or maybe punishment for her stupidity. Imagine if she'd walked in on Jordan instead of Justin.

She shook her head as heat burned her cheeks. She didn't even want to think about it. With longing thoughts of a shower with or without Justin under the hot water, she dressed and went out to the kitchen to start a pot of coffee for him and Jordan.

For herself this morning, she felt like tea. Too much caffeine might dislodge her euphoria.

She raised her steaming mug for a sip when Justin walked in. The man looked like her own personal calendar model in boots, worn blue jeans, and a white sleeveless tee shirt—and the dark blond hair tumbling in disarray over his forehead was damp from the shower.

*Damn.*

## Chapter 21

Justin paused as Marley looked at him over the rim of her cup. The soft chestnut curls he'd run his fingers through last night framed her face before falling past her shoulders.

"Good morning."

Her unrestrained, welcoming smile darn near knocked the breath right out of him as it shot straight to his heart. For a moment it stopped beating. Then it took off at a speed that had him reaching for the counter to steady himself. That low voice of hers stirred his desire all over again with the memory last night. The fact that he'd been the first man to make love to her—the realization of which had rocked him to his core—only intensified the one thought echoing in his head.

*She's mine.* He'd never thought himself a possessive man, but suddenly the idea of anyone else touching her was enough to boil his blood.

He realized he had yet to respond to her greeting. He wasn't sure about speaking without sounding like a complete idiot. They'd known each other less than three weeks, and right now, everything was so jumbled up and twisted inside, it was hard to make sense of it all.

"Morning," he finally said. Hopefully, his smile conveyed casual as he headed for the coffee pot.

He needed a good strong dose of caffeine to jolt his system back to normal. As he brushed past her, his nerve endings came alive, as if reaching out, wanting to touch and hold her.

Okay, normal as he'd known it looked to be out

of the question. Probably forever.

He poured the coffee with a sideways glance to see if he could gauge her mood. The pensive look on her face brought a rush of guilt, and he set the pot down before his cup was full.

"Marley...about last night...I'm—"

Her eyes widened, and she backed up a step. "Oh, God, don't."

He frowned. "Don't what?"

"Apologize."

"I wasn't going to. I just wanted to say..." He paused, not really sure what he'd been about to say. This was another new feeling for him. He didn't like it one bit. "Well, that...I..."

"I'm a big girl, Justin." She drew herself up with a show of dignity as she plunked her mug down. "Just say it."

He drew in a breath, knowing he couldn't say what he *really* wanted to. His primitive, possessive urges would come off sounding caveman-like. Before he could form the right words, she spoke again.

"It was my choice, and I don't regret it."

"If I'd known it was your first time—"

"If you're going to say that you wouldn't have, then I'm glad you didn't know."

Her honesty made him want her all the more. He stepped forward to lightly grasp her arms and looked into her eyes. "I would've gone slower—been gentler. I was a little...desperate...last night." Unable to resist any longer, he pulled her to him and buried his face in her hair. "It kills me that I might have hurt you. I'm sorry."

He felt her fingers thread through his damp hair at the base of his neck, her short nails scraping his scalp. A shudder coursed through him. She turned her head and her warm breath brushed his ear.

"You can get *desperate* with me any time you want."

Her husky voice turned him on like she'd flipped a switch. One quick twist of his head and he captured her mouth. His hips effectively pinned her against the counter. After a long, breathless minute, he asked, "How about right now?"

The strident ring of the phone stilled them both. Her shoulders drooped, and she gave a reluctant smile. "How about later?"

"I'll hold you to that," he said, reaching to grab the phone and hand it to her. An automatic glance at the caller ID revealed *unknown name, unknown number*.

He returned to the coffee pot to finish pouring his cup and added a dash of sugar, a drop of cream. The uncomfortable fit of his jeans made him think twice about sitting at the table, so he leaned back against the island counter. He let his gaze linger on Marley's curves as he raised his mug.

"Who is this?"

Her ashen face and harsh tone halted his hand before the rim even touched his lips. Her gaze sliced to Justin. Her voice shook with a hint of apprehension and, if the tightness of her features was anything to go by, the onset of anger. Justin nearly dropped his mug on the table. Coffee sloshed over the sides as he set it down and started toward her. Marley held up a hand while taking a step back, her expression grim.

"I don't have that kind of money!"

Justin felt his own rage begin a slow boil. More blackmail? This guy was growing way too greedy, way too fast.

"But I can't—"

Marley clamped her mouth shut and Justin held up both hands in surrender as he approached, letting her know he wouldn't interfere. She hesitated, then held the phone at a slight angle so he could listen in from the position he took up alongside

her.

“...bring the cash,” the caller instructed. The muffled voice was low enough to be male, but also sounded purposely disguised. There was no way to know for sure if it was a man, and possibly the same person blackmailing his family.

“What if I can’t get that much?” Marley asked.

“Oh, you’ll get it. I know you’re not stupid.”

She drew in a deep breath. “Then what makes you think I’d meet you at a deserted job site after dark?”

Justin’s gaze met hers. He shook his head swiftly. She stared back without batting an eye. That scared him. It told him she actually contemplated meeting this low-life scumbag. Not if he had anything to say about it.

Footsteps sounded in the hall. He and Marley looked toward the doorway as Jordan walked in, looking ragged and in need of some caffeine and a shower.

“If you know what’s good for your brother, you’ll be there,” the voice on the other end of the line warned.

“Smells good in—” Jordan started to say. Justin sliced his hand frantically in the air to shut him up while Marley rushed to cup hers over the receiver.

“What?” Jordan asked.

“Is there someone else there?” the caller demanded.

“It’s the TV.” Marley directed a warning glare toward Jordan. He frowned, but continued to the coffee pot.

“Something to keep in mind, Marley,” the caller said. “St. Mary’s, room three-forty-five.”

*Nate’s room.* Marley’s indrawn breath made the jerk on the other line laugh while Justin’s muscles tensed.

“That’s right. I can still get to him any time I

choose.”

“Listen to me you son-of-a—”

“Bring the money and only the money. I even smell a cop and Nate’s dead.”

There was a distinct click on the line, telling Justin the caller had hung up. When Marley didn’t move right away, he reached to take the phone from her hand. She resisted at first, but the moment he gained the handset, she whirled around as if snapping out of a trance.

“Can you believe this?”

Justin punched in the universal code to dial back the phone’s last caller, but all he got was a recording saying, “*Number unavailable.*”

“Someone want to tell me what’s going on?” Jordan asked from behind them. Justin watched Marley struggle to contain her anger.

“He wants ten grand to leave Nate alone,” she said to Justin.

Jordan lowered his cup of coffee after taking a gulp. “Who wants ten grand?” Justin waited for her answer, too, even as he envied Jordan his caffeine.

“I’ll find out when I get there,” Marley said.

Justin’s gaze sliced back toward her. He didn’t like her matter-of-fact tone. “Get where?”

“The Forrester site at nine o’clock tonight.”

“You’re not going.”

“Of course I am.” She reached for her mug.

He braced a hand on the counter to block her path. “No. This guy threatened to hurt Nate—”

“Exactly the reason I have to go.”

“What makes you think he won’t hurt you?”

“I’ll have my gun.”

“No way in hell!” Justin exploded. “It’s too dangerous!”

Marley flinched at his outburst. That sounded like he cared—really cared—about her. But that couldn’t be right, because *she* might be

inexperienced and naïve enough to fall for someone so quickly, but the odds were Justin wasn't.

Sex didn't mean love to men. Yet another thing she'd learned from watching her father while growing up.

"What right do you have to tell me what I can and can't do? Especially when it concerns my brother's safety." She stepped around him for her tea.

She noticed Jordan at the table, listening to every word, and heard Justin's frustrated breath as she took a sip from her mug. Lukewarm. She put it in the microwave and jabbed the buttons.

"He's my brother, too," Justin reminded her. "But if you even try going out there tonight, Marley, I swear I will—"

She rounded on him. "You'll what?"

"You quit, remember? You go to that site and it'll be trespassing."

Her eyes narrowed at his implication. "You wouldn't."

He didn't blink. "I'll call the damn cops myself."

So much for the notion that he cared.

"Hey," Jordan said from his spot at the table. They both turned to see him soaking up Justin's earlier coffee mess with a paper napkin. "Maybe instead of trying to out-boss each other, you two could sit down and we can talk this out rationally."

Justin ran a hand through his hair and dropped down into a chair kitty-corner from Jordan. Marley glared at the both of them, crossing her arms to lean against the counter as Justin took a shot of his coffee.

Men in the kitchen drinking coffee was something she was used to, and yet completely alien at the same time. She'd had breakfast at this very table with her father and brother countless times over the years, but this was the man who'd touched



her in the most intimate of ways last night, and *his* brother. Now they were discussing a blackmailer who threatened to kill Nate. How had her life changed so drastically in just a few weeks?

And what would be the smart way to handle this?

The microwave beeped, and she yanked open the door to grab her mug. Once she was sitting across from Justin at the table, she wrapped her hands around the heated ceramic and met his gaze.

“Okay, fine. Let’s call the cops.”

“Whoa,” Jordan protested with an uncomfortable laugh. “I said rational.”

Justin’s brows rose, but his gaze never left hers. “You going to call, or do you want me to?”

He thought she was bluffing. “You can.”

“Seriously, this is not a good idea,” Jordan tried again.

“Why not?” Marley and Justin asked in unison as they turned toward him. Marley noticed he looked a little green around the gills. Was it lingering effects of the alcohol last night, or the thought of dealing with the law?

Jordan leaned close to Justin. “What if they want to investigate?” he asked in a low tone.

“That’s the point,” Marley said.

He cast her an irritated glance, but his words were for his twin. “You can’t do this, Justin. What if our names get dragged into it? What if this is the same guy who blackmailed us? If they investigate and uncover something Granddad did, it’ll ruin us.”

Marley held her own temper with effort as Justin’s jaw tightened. He shoved up from the table.

“I’m going to forget you just said that,” Justin bit out. “You’re not thinking straight this morning.”

“I’m thinking fine. Why can’t *we* just go with her?”

“He said to come alone,” Marley snapped.

"Then we definitely shouldn't call the cops," Jordan argued.

"We don't know what this guy is capable of," Justin said. "I'm not sending her in there without some sort of protection—" his gaze swung to hers "—other than that damn gun you're so fond of."

Jordan didn't reply. Marley saw he was torn and felt some of her anger—the part aimed at him—slip away. If she stopped to look at it from where he sat, she couldn't blame him for his concerns, self-serving though they might be. If the roles were reversed, she couldn't say if she'd want to take the chance of losing her company, either.

Jordan let out a deep sigh. "Would you at least consider calling Colton first?" he asked. "Wasn't his brother-in-law Joel a cop, or an investigator?"

"Jordan—"

"He could help. Or he might know someone who—"

Justin shook his head. "It's got to go through the police or the only way any of it will end is in a way that I'm not willing to ever consider."

\*\*\*\*\*

Marley shifted in her seat. The tape holding the wire for the recording device pulled against the sensitive skin between her breasts. If only the police's attempts to trace the blackmailer's call had yielded something other than one of those untraceable, throw-away cell phones.

She restrained the impulse to pull open the front of her shirt to look again. The tiny microphone had been fine the last three times she'd checked it. Her head dipped anyway as her hand rose.

Justin reached over from the driver's side of her truck to guide her hand back to her thigh. His touch calmed her nerves while at the same time sending heat through her with the memory of last night.

"Don't be nervous, we'll be right around the

corner.”

“I’m not nervous. I can handle this guy.”

“Promise you’ll use the signal if you feel even the least bit uncomfortable.”

She coughed, twice, just like they’d discussed. His hand tightened on hers.

“Marley—”

“Well, I’m uncomfortable, the tape is pulling. It’s going to be a bitch taking it off.”

He gave a gruff chuckle that faded fast. *He did care.* She was touched by his concern; had been all day. It made her hope for tomorrow, or even later tonight when all this was behind them. In fact, maybe when they were alone again they could talk about the future.

Her heart thumped, and she swallowed hard. *That* made her nervous.

She closed her eyes. Ran through the instructions from Detectives Powell and Turner once more.

Remain calm.

Walk in, get the information the suspect offered, try to get him to say something incriminating, but only if she thought she could get it without making him suspicious.

Last, give him the cash and walk out. They’d take care of it from there.

If at any time she felt the blackmailer presented a physical threat, she could give the signal and they’d be there in less than a minute. *Yeah, sure.* It wasn’t that she didn’t have faith in the officers who’d been sent to the house and were currently following them to the job site, but she knew she could reach her ankle in a matter of seconds.

Yeah, she’d brought her gun. It’d been easy to walk out with the detectives, then claim she needed to go back inside to use the bathroom. Her loose-legged running pants hid the gun tucked into her

sock, though Justin's glance when she returned told her he knew what she'd done. Surprisingly, he hadn't said a word.

"Promise me you won't try to be a hero," Justin insisted.

She lifted a mock-offended brow. "Hero?"

His jaw clenched. "You know what I mean."

"After last night there should be no question as to my gender."

"I'll treat you like a woman when the time calls for it," he growled. "Quit avoiding the subject, dammit."

Damn, he knew her. "Okay, okay, I promise."

Or maybe not damn. Her spirits lifted a little more. Her life might have changed almost beyond recognition, but that silver lining shone with promise.

## Chapter 22

Justin shifted the truck into park, left it running as he stepped out, then watched Marley slide over behind the wheel while he shut the door. She reached for the gearshift and an overwhelming surge of emotion choked him up. He rapped on the window.

After a quick surprised glance, she rolled it down. Before she could say anything, he leaned forward and cupped the back of her head to draw her into a searing kiss. Pulling back, he stared into her beautiful green eyes.

God, it killed him to send her in there alone.

"I—" It came out as a croak. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Marley, I—"

She reached up to place her fingers over his lips. "I'll use the signal."

He searched her eyes and saw nothing but truth. And something else that swelled his heart. Could it be...?

"And you don't lie," he murmured.

"That's right," she stated, focusing her attention on the road in front of her as she shifted into drive. "I'll be back before you know it."

Her taillights drew away into the near dark of dusk, then slowed and made the final turn a half block away. Once the red lights disappeared, his heart beat with fear. He wanted to run after the truck, wanted to go in with her so she didn't have to face this scumbag alone. Fists clenched hard, he forced a deep, calming breath.

He had to let the police do their job; Marley's gun aside, that's why they'd called them. With that

in mind, he hurried to the unmarked car the detectives waited in and slid into the back seat.

Marley's voice crackled over the wire. They could hear her, but she couldn't hear them. A safety precaution for her sake, so she didn't react to something the detectives might say and alert the blackmailer.

"There's one vehicle," she said. "A black blazer, I've got the license plate..."

Justin listened to her rattle off the number as he marveled at her calm tone. Oddly enough, her confidence scared him even more. He worried her cockiness would make her careless.

Detective Powell keyed the license plate number into the onboard computer. While they waited for the information to come up, Marley continued the dialogue of her movements.

Something niggled Justin's memory. He couldn't pinpoint why, but his uneasiness multiplied beyond his initial concern. Dread deepened and took hold, shortening his breath. Suddenly he wished with his entire being that he'd told her how much she meant to him.

\*\*\*\*

Marley looked around carefully as she made her way toward the building. It had changed since her last visit. All the walls were enclosed and the multi-level roof of the two story structure was in place. The shadows created by her truck headlights loomed large on the plywood sheeting lining the wall in front of her.

"I don't see anyone out here," she said toward her chest, hoping they could hear her lowered voice.

A shadow moved inside, by one of the black, framed window openings. Her pulse went haywire. God, she really was nervous. Even though Justin's kiss had helped, he wasn't *here*. And right about now, she'd give anything to have him at her side.

Even hearing his voice would help.

*Buck up, Marley. Get through this and you'll have all night with him.*

"I'm going inside," she said.

She straightened her spine, mentally and physically, and made her way toward the door. Just shy of the opening, she paused in the darkest shadows with a cautious glance around. Leaning down, she un-tucked her gun, then slid it into the front pocket of her jogging suit jacket. As she straightened, she thought she saw the outline of another vehicle parked closer to the supervisor's trailer.

Great. Was there more than one person waiting for her inside? Her pulse jittered, making her take a deep breath. She was sure it was a car, but couldn't make out any details in the dark to give the detectives. Not that it mattered; she was too close to the house to talk to them anyway.

Instead, she called, "I've got the money."

"Bring it inside." The voice sounded different from on the phone. Higher? "Nice and slow. I want to see your hands."

As she stepped through the opening, she could've kicked herself for not grabbing the flashlight she kept in the glove box of her truck. In the next instant, a light shined directly into her eyes.

Marley squinted, cocking her head while raising her arm to block the glare. She made out a dark figure, not overly tall, and slender in appearance. Without a light of her own, his face remained shadowed.

"Are you alone?"

Make that *her* face. Now Marley recognized it in the speaker's higher-pitched tone.

"You already know the answer to that," Marley said. "I saw you in the window from outside." Her

eyes began to water and she protested, "I can't see anything."

"That's the point."

"I think we've got a problem."

The harsh whisper from a dark corner startled Marley. She turned to the left to find the source.

"Shut up," the woman ordered. The light wavered and Marley peered into the inky blackness where the man's voice had come from. Light-stars from the flashlight obscured her vision, making it impossible to identify the man.

For the benefit of the detectives listening in, Marley asked, "There's two of you?"

"I'm not getting a pulse," the man said.

The voice sounded familiar. Then his words registered and her heart kicked against her ribs. She moved her hand toward her pocket.

"Don't move," the woman demanded. The piercing glare of the flashlight blinded Marley once more. Should she cough now, or try to get the information needed to make a case? Since she couldn't see clearly to know exactly who held the light, Marley decided to give it another minute.

"I was getting the money," she said to mollify the woman. "Promise you'll leave Nate alone and I'll hand it over."

The woman's laugh sent a shiver down Marley's spine.

"People fall for three things. Money—that'd be the greedy idiot lying on the floor; sex—that'd be the idiot husband of mine next to him; and family—that'd be you. Those three things are the root of most problems in the world today."

Trying not to dwell on the fact there could be a dead body nearby, Marley asked, "Where do you fall?"

"You'd think it's money, right? But no, it's family. I wouldn't be here at all if—"



“Save it, Diana,” the man in the shadows snapped. “If we don’t hustle, our alibi won’t hold up.”

“*Shut up!*” the woman hissed.

The name clicked with the man’s voice. Completely shocked, Marley asked, “Dale?”

“God, it’s a wonder I ever married you,” the woman said. “I told you no names!”

“By the time we’re done, it won’t matter, anyway,” he retorted.

A second flashlight clicked on. Marley’s eyes confirmed what her ears had already told her. Dale Blake. At his feet lay a prone body.

“I can’t get over how much you look like her,” Diana Blake said. “It’s like *déjà vu*.”

Marley tore her gaze from the body to discover Diana now angled her flashlight toward the floor. Between not having the beam directly in her eyes and Dale’s light, she could make out half of the older woman’s face—and promptly wished she couldn’t.

Then Diana’s words sunk in. “What are you talking about?”

“Even your voice is like hers. Is that what it is? Do you find it sexy?”

Marley was confused until she realized Diana’s questions were for Dale.

“It’s better than your high-pitched bitchiness,” he muttered.

Diana turned back to Marley. “I remember your mother’s voice like I’d only heard it yesterday. She begged for her life in that voice.”

Marley’s numb mind didn’t want to believe what she heard. “My mother was killed in a robbery.”

Diana laughed. “Like there was anything of value in that dump of a house. Even back then, Marley, your family was nothing more than useless working class. If my husband could’ve kept it in his pants, I never would’ve had to deal with any of you. Twenty-five years ago, or now.”

\*\*\*\*

Justin reached the construction site at a dead-run. At the first sound of his father's voice, he'd leapt from the unmarked police car, uncaring that Detective Powell ordered him back inside. He'd dodged Turner, too, desperate to get to the site and—oh, God, he didn't know what he would do.

What was his father doing there? What was his *mother* doing there? And he sure as hell hoped Marley didn't do anything stupid with the gun. He knew she had it. He'd deliberately avoided speaking to her about it, because the truth was he'd *wanted* her to have that extra bit of protection. Now it scared the shit out of him. He reached the building and was about to enter when he heard Marley's anguished voice.

"*You* killed my mother?"

His step faltered.

"She got pregnant on purpose," he heard his mother say. "She threatened to ruin the Hunter name unless we paid her. If she hadn't been so greedy and vindictive, she might still be alive today."

Shock paralyzed him for a moment. He shook it off and stepped into the building behind Marley. A quick glance confirmed his father behind his mother, to the left. He strode forward, determined to put an end to whatever the hell was happening.

"Justin," his mother exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

He saw the gun she held, and stopped halfway between his parents and Marley. Fear for Marley's safety increased his tension, even as his mind argued that his mother wouldn't actually pull the trigger. "I came with Marley."

His mother's face twisted, her rage evident as her gaze shifted back to Marley. "You stupid slut. You're no better than your mother."

Fierce protectiveness seized Justin. "That's

enough. Don't say another word."

"No, let her talk," Marley said softly.

Justin looked over to see that in the split second his mother had been distracted, Marley had pulled her gun. Her rock-steady hands extended toward his mother as she raised her weapon a few inches and took a step closer to Diana.

"Go ahead, tell us what you did when my mother begged for her life." Her gaze shifted to Dale, just for a second, as she asked, "Were you there, too?"

Justin caught the guilt and unease in his father's expression. Worse, when he looked back to his mother, her lips curled in a malicious little smile as she and Marley faced off.

"Go ahead, say it," Marley demanded.

"You really want to hear the details?" his mother gloated.

Justin knew what Marley was doing; it was for the tape. He felt sick to his stomach. Despite what they might have done, an inborn instinct to protect his family had him wanting to warn his mother to not incriminate herself any further.

"Mom—"

"Be quiet, Justin."

Was there any way to turn back the clock to this morning?

His father shifted in the thick silence. The light from his flashlight wavered and Justin caught sight of a body on the floor. His heart pounded as he spotted a bloody hammer off to the side.

"My God, what happened?" He rushed over to kneel beside the man. It looked like Tommy Berndt, the man who'd sent the blackmail notes. Justin hadn't seen the man since he'd worked for Hunter while in college, but he hadn't changed much.

"Give me some light," he told his dad.

"He's dead," his mother snapped. "I'm done paying blackmail. Forever."

“Call 911,” Justin said. The wide, dark stain under Berndt’s head made his stomach roll. As he felt for a pulse, his father stared at him, hands hanging at his sides.

“We didn’t have a choice,” Dale said. He backed up a step, both his hands rising to cover his face. “God, this should’ve all ended with Karl. When I—when he died, that was supposed to be it, no more payments. But then this son-of-a-bitch figured he could go after the company instead. You *know* we don’t have the money to keep him quiet.”

“So you killed him instead?” Disbelief and anger drove Justin to his feet as an unyielding sense of right and wrong took over. Family or not, murder was murder.

“Is he really dead?” Marley asked.

*Oh, God, Marley.* Justin heard the first thread of fear in her voice. The nauseous sensation in his stomach tripled. Shame engulfed him as he comprehended everything his parents had done. They’d murdered this man. They’d killed Marley’s mother, for God’s sake. If she didn’t hate him already, she would once she had a second to think about it.

He forced himself to face her, mentally preparing for what he’d read in her expression. She stared at his mother.

“Justin, you need to leave,” his mother said. Her gaze flicked briefly to his, then narrowed on Marley. “We’ll take care of everything. You go back to our house and stay there. You’ve been there all night. Your father and I’ll vouch for your whereabouts and you can do the same for us. Airtight alibis. Once she and that bastard brother of hers are gone, the Hunter name will be safe again and no one will ever know about any of this.”

At the mention of Nate, Justin looked at his father again. “You pushed Nate, didn’t you? Your

own son.”

“Justin, go,” his mother commanded.

“No.”

He couldn't believe she actually expected him to leave Marley with *them*. He had to get her to safety, away from this psychopath who used to be his mother. If anything happened to Marley, he'd never forgive himself. This wasn't some honest-to-God accident he could come to terms with and eventually move on from.

“Justin.” His father suddenly grew a pair. “It's us or her. Now get the hell out of here.”

“You are not going to get away with this.” Marley's cold, flat voice sent a chill straight through Justin.

“Who's going to stop us?” his mother sneered.

Marley kept her gun aimed at his mother with calm precision. “The first bullet you'll hear. You might even feel the wind when it whines past your ear.”

The quiet words clearly unnerved his mother. Her face paled. The hand holding her gun wavered. Justin worried Marley had increased the danger to herself by pushing his mother to the breaking point. Dale backed up against the wall, his balls withered as fast as they'd grown.

*This* was the stupid thing Justin had worried about. Stupid because it would screw up Marley's life. This wasn't the woman he knew, and he wasn't about to let her stoop to his parents' level. Let the cops deal with his parents and—

Where the hell were the cops anyway? Surely they didn't need a damn double cough to confirm things had gone to hell, did they?

Justin cleared his throat and stepped between the two guns. Terror gripped him. Strangely enough, it was harder for him to meet Marley's eyes than face her loaded gun. Her expression froze his heart.

“Move.”

“Don’t do this,” he said. Shame and guilt, and fear for her roughened his voice. “Let them go.” If he could get them outside, the danger to Marley would be gone.

Her eyes widened before her face went blank. “Over my dead body.”

Exactly what he feared. Justin advanced toward her, but directed his words over his shoulder at his parents. “Go. I’ll deal with her.”

“Justin—*no*,” Marley protested. “You can’t let—”

“Get the hell out before the cops get here.”

“You called the cops?” His father’s question ended on a note of panic.

*“Just go!”*

Justin carefully blocked any shot his mother might be deranged enough to attempt at Marley as she and Dale started for the door. His body tensed to the point of pain as he caught Marley’s gaze once more.

“Give me the gun.”

Too stunned to move, Marley stood still as Justin wrapped his fingers around her hand and the gun, and then trapped her against the wall with his body. His parents were almost to the door.

“You son-of-a-bitch.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” he ground out between clenched teeth.

Marley tried to make sense of it all, but her heart broke into a million jagged pieces. He’d let them go. She couldn’t believe he’d chosen them over—

A shout outside the door erupted as lights flooded the building and the police descended in full force.

*“Drop your weapons. Get down on the ground. NOW.”*

The commands were barked in rapid succession,

several times, by different officers. Dale and Diana were already outside, so it wasn't until two yelling officers burst inside the building that Marley realized they meant her and Justin, too.

Justin had wrestled the gun from her grasp, so she raised her empty hands and stared down the barrel of an officer's weapon. After Justin surrendered the gun, he was shoved to the floor. When the officer began to cuff him while reciting his Miranda rights, Marley started forward in protest. "What are you—"

"Stay where you are, Ma'am." The first officer held his gun steady on her. She stared at him, then at Justin, spread-eagled on the floor, handcuffed, and a foot on his back to hold him down.

"This is bullshit," Justin fumed, his face pressed against the plywood floor. "I came with Detective Powell."

Marley looked around for the detective and spotted Dale and Diana Blake outside on the ground, in similar positions as Justin.

"Miss Wade, are you okay?"

She turned to face Detective Powell. "I'm fine." Then she looked pointedly at the cop who still had his gun out. Detective Powell nodded to him, and the officer holstered his weapon before turning away.

"Took you long enough," Marley said as the Blakes were escorted from the yard.

The detective took hold of her arm and drew her aside. "We had to call for back up. Once we started hearing different names, we had no idea how many people we were dealing with."

"I said there were two."

"Something the woman said indicated there might be a third person, and then that idiot," he inclined his head toward Justin, "rushed in, and we realized he knew the suspects. We needed more men."

She watched them haul Justin to his feet and push him after his parents. She tried to catch his eye, but he looked straight past her on his way out the door.

“Why are you arresting him?”

“Until we can be sure he isn’t an accessory—”

“He was with you until just a few minutes ago,” she exclaimed. Though she didn’t know why she defended him. What did she care if the traitor was arrested?

“He aided and abetted the suspects. That’s a felony.”

Marley’s jaw dropped. “You can’t be serious.”

Detective Powell’s expression confirmed the gravity of Justin’s charges. “I’m going to need you to come down to the station for a formal statement, Miss Wade. Unfortunately, it’s going to be a long night.”



## Chapter 23

The detective hadn't exaggerated. By Marley's third cup of coffee, second donut, and fourth interview, it was half past three a.m. She would've been exhausted if she hadn't been so wired from everything that'd happened.

She'd learned who'd murdered her mother twenty-five years ago, seen a dead body, stared down the barrels of two guns, and had her heart broken. Her mind revved in overdrive.

She hadn't gotten so much as a glimpse of Justin since arriving, but seeing him would only scrape the raw wound bleeding inside her chest.

He'd let them go. That fact was the one thing she understood clearly. He'd seen the dead man, heard from his mother's own mouth what she'd done to Marley's mother, and he'd still let them walk out the door.

What she didn't understand, was the way he'd pushed her against the wall and ordered her to give him the gun before wrestling it away. His behavior should've scared her. He'd overpowered her and taken away her only defense, but she hadn't been afraid. Not of him.

Subconsciously, she realized he wouldn't hurt her. This was the man who'd let guilt eat him up inside over the tragic, accidental death of a co-worker. The man who'd apologized after he realized it'd been her first time making love and worried he'd been too passionate. He wouldn't suddenly turn on her with her own gun. He didn't have it in him.

She sat up straight and replayed the events.

Seeing his shadowed face in her mind's eye, she wondered all of a sudden...had he been protecting her?

Like an eager puppy, hope leapt in her chest. After a few deep breaths, she forced herself to think through the evening's events rationally and felt her optimism fade. Even if he *had* been protecting her, the fact remained that he'd tried to help his murdering parents escape. Essentially, he'd chosen them over her.

\*\*\*\*

Justin looked up as the door opened, expecting to see the lawyer he'd called over an hour ago. Instead, his brother entered. Justin didn't get up and when Jordan demanded to know what happened, he just shook his head.

Jordan leaned across the metal table. "No one's telling me anything. If, as this Berndt guy says, Granddad killed someone, then why have three living members of my family been arrested for murder?"

"Because Berndt's dead."

Jordan's jaw dropped. "What?"

Justin sat back in his chair, frowning at the scent of alcohol on his brother's breath. "I've called a lawyer. But until—"

"Why do *you* need a lawyer? You were with the damn cops. What the hell did you do?"

Justin held onto his frayed patience by taking a deep breath. "I didn't do anything, but after what I heard tonight, you bet your ass I'm waiting for the lawyer."

Jordan sat down, his expression grave. "What did you hear?"

Justin rolled his eyes. With a sigh, he leaned forward and lowered his own voice. "Why do you think they let you in here? They want me to say something so they can twist it around to incriminate

me.”

“What about Mom and Dad? What the hell were they doing there, anyway?”

The unreality of the entire night washed over Justin again. Their parents were murderers. This happened in movies, or a book, not his life.

Unfortunately, just like in the movies, and thanks to the Blake family rule that appearances were everything, the media was going to be all over this. Their grandfather had been an active member of the community; an upstanding, respected, generous man—anything to get him, his daughter Diana, and the Hunter name into the public eye in a positive light and promote the company.

Once the media got wind of the charges filed against Diana and Dale Blake, of the fact that the Great Karl Hunter had known about it and paid blackmail for years, more people would know their names in a day than in all the years of Granddad’s charity work. His and Jordan’s reputations would be ruined by association. Add the fact that another murder had occurred on a Hunter Construction job site, and their business would be gone, too.

Justin hoped Jordan would be able to handle it; and he wished, at that moment, that he could be anywhere but here, having to explain to his brother why their parents had been arrested.

He forced himself to meet Jordan’s gaze. “Mom and Dad will be charged with not only Tommy Berndt’s murder, but probably Annette Wade’s as well.”

It took a moment for the words to sink in. Confusion and disbelief played across Jordan’s expression before he asked, “Who the hell is Annette Wade?”

“Marley’s mother.”

“What the—I thought she died years ago?”

“She did. It was thought to be a robbery back

then, but they've got mom on tape with some pretty damning testimony," Justin said. "Remember that document on Granddad's computer? He knew, and that's why he paid Dad to stay married to her all these years. Protect the family name at all costs."

"Mom might be a bitch sometimes, but she's not capable of murder."

"You weren't there," Justin said tersely.

Jordan looked like he'd be sick. "You believe she did it?"

"They," Justin ground out. "Dad's no innocent bystander. I saw Tommy's body. I heard Mom taunt Marley about how her mother begged for her life. God, I can't even imagine what she's going through right now."

"Knowing Mom, she's demanding to be released."

"I meant Marley."

"We're talking about the family here," Jordan snapped.

"Marley's more family to me than they are."

"Oh, yeah? Then why the hell were you arrested? How come your precious Marley isn't coming to your defense now?"

Justin clamped his jaw to combat the ache in his chest. He knew exactly why he hadn't seen her in the five hours since he'd been arrested. And what would it matter if he told Jordan? He hadn't done anything wrong and it wasn't like anything he'd say wasn't already on tape from Marley's wire.

"Mom and Marley each had a gun. I was afraid Mom would hurt her, so I told Mom and Dad I'd take care of Marley and they should run."

Jordan stared, incredulous. "*What?*"

"I figured if I could get them out of there, Marley would be safe. I knew the cops were either outside or on the way. I took Marley's gun from her as they burst in. Because they heard me telling Mom and

Dad to leave, they arrested me for aiding and abetting. I had no chance to explain before they started that Miranda shit, so I shut up and asked for a lawyer."

Justin looked at the mirrored wall and raised his voice. "Though it's taking awfully long to get him in here."

Jordan glanced at the mirror, then back to Justin. "The reporters are out there already. I think they recognized me, too. It's going to be all over the news."

"I'm sorry, Jordan." He didn't know what else to say.

"We've been operating on credit as it is," Jordan continued. "We're so screwed."

"We can't change what happened," Justin said wearily. "We didn't do anything and hopefully people will understand that. Either way, we'll just have to see how the cards fall."

He rubbed a tired hand over his face to block out Jordan's dismay, knowing his words were cold comfort and most likely not true anyway.

The inside of his eyelids felt like sandpaper and the coffee they'd brought him two hours ago hadn't done shit. It should've, the tar-like liquid had been so damn bitter it matched his mood, but he hadn't gotten a whole lot of sleep the last few nights.

And he couldn't stop thinking about Marley. Was she okay? Would she ever talk to him again?

"You didn't, by chance, see Marley out there, did you?"

Jordan shook his head. Justin recalled her expression when he'd taken her gun and told his parents to get out. Her accusing glare had sliced into him and he'd been bleeding ever since. What his parents had done was incomprehensible. Stolen her mother when she was a child. Tried to kill her brother. Intended to kill her.

How did someone get past that? Even if by some miracle she agreed to talk to him, every time she looked at him, she'd be reminded of all they'd done. He couldn't do that to her and live with the guilt that already crushed his chest.

"You aren't still going to see her when all this is over, are you?" Jordan asked.

Justin snorted. "You mean tonight, or after the media have their field day? Assuming the charges against me don't stick, and I'm not in jail, there's still Mom and Dad's trial to consider. How long do you think that'll take?" He didn't bother to soften his sarcasm.

"You're not going to jail," Jordan stated with a hint of panic. "You didn't do anything."

"Doesn't matter either way. Marley's better off without me."

"You're better off without her, if you ask me."

The door opened and Detective Powell stepped inside with Justin's lawyer and another man.

"Justin, this is the district attorney, Marshall Rymer," Detective Powell said. Then he turned to Jordan. "If you'll excuse us, Detective Turner will show you to the waiting room."

\*\*\*\*

Finally finished with her debriefing, Marley walked down the hall in search of Justin. She had to talk to him. Set things straight in her mind as to what actually happened tonight. Her heart skipped a beat when she saw him walking toward her, but a second later she recognized Jordan. The rush of disappointment left her knees weak.

"Where's Justin?"

His gaze zeroed in on her and the look of pure hatred in his eyes left her speechless. "You just had to call the damn cops, didn't you?"

"Jordan..."

"Justin doesn't want to see you."

She stared at him. "He said that?"

Jordan's gaze flicked away, then returned as he leaned toward her. "Our family is ruined. Do you really think he wants anything to do with you after what you've done?"

Marley went rigid. Wait just a minute. Forget about the fact that she could get half-drunk off his breath, but *what she'd done?* "None of this is my fault."

"You and that brother of yours and the damn cops—"

"Don't you dare lay this on us! Your parents killed my mother, Jordan. They were going to kill me." Her voice shook and she had to draw a deep breath to keep from exploding. "Your father put Nate in the hospital—his own son—your half-brother."

"He's not my brother."

"Yes he is, whether you like it or not. Justin—"

"Shut up," Jordan snarled. "You and *your* brother can go to hell for all I care. And as for Justin, leave him alone. He'll have enough to deal with without having to look at you and constantly be reminded of all this shit. He'd be forced to be nice to you while the guilt kills him inside."

Marley sucked in a breath. She'd seen what guilt did to Justin. Jordan was right.

"You've done more than enough," Jordan said. "Now go away and leave us the hell alone."

Marley stared after him before turning to walk numbly out the door. That's when all hell broke loose. Flashbulbs blinded her. A crush of bodies surrounded her. Microphones were shoved in her face, and questions were shouted without anyone waiting for answers.

"Ms. Wade—can you tell us what happened?"

"Were you hurt, Ms. Wade?"

"Do you know who was killed?"

“Can you confirm there were shots fired?”

“Did the Blake twins know the victim?”

“What is your relationship to the accused?”

Marley held up a hand to shield the paralyzing camera flashes. How did they even know who she was? A hand grasped her elbow as Detective Turner’s voice boomed over the noise. “Ms. Wade has no comment at this time.”

He guided her down the steps to where one of the officers from earlier had parked her truck. A few of the more tenacious reporters followed them, but they held back when the detective raised a staying hand.

“Would you rather I have an officer take you home?” he asked Marley.

She eyed the rabid mob of news crews still taking pictures, but shook her head. “I’ll be fine. How do they know so much already?”

Detective Turner sighed. “There’s a police scanner in every newsroom. But we need you to keep quiet. If too much of this leaks out, it’ll be bad for the case.”

Jordan’s accusations and blame echoed in her mind. “You don’t have to ask me twice.”

Dale and Diana Blake were going to pay for what they’d done, and she’d do nothing to hinder their trip to hell. If nothing else, she’d have justice. Considering Justin didn’t even want to see her, most likely blamed her like Jordan did, what did she have to lose that she hadn’t lost already?



## Chapter 24

Marley brought Nate's sandwich to the couch, where he sat with his cast propped on the coffee table. She glanced at the TV and rolled her eyes with annoyance.

"It's been a week. Can't they let the damn thing go?" It was hard to walk away and not watch, but so far she'd managed to ignore the barrage of news reports. Just as she ignored the vultures camped outside their door. At least they were dwindling. Finally.

"This is a big thing for our little city," Nate said. "There hasn't been a high-profile, multiple murder case like this in sixteen years."

Marley turned to him with a frown. He didn't have to sound so excited about it.

Nate shrugged. "That's what they said yesterday."

"Why do you watch it, anyway? Doesn't it bother you?"

It bothered her. The constant reminder of everything the Blakes had taken from her. And it wasn't just her mother. It was hard to miss what you didn't remember having. But Justin...

She'd had his friendship. His caring. His touch.

Justin, she missed.

She sat on the couch and watched the TV in spite of herself. A reporter advised the bloodthirsty public about the arraignment for Dale and Diana Blake today while their mug shots flashed on the screen. Since talking to the police that night, Marley had been torn about her desire for justice. Well, not

torn really. She wanted them to pay their debt to society, but for Justin's sake, she regretted what was to come. This had to be so hard for him. Just thinking of him made her chest ache.

"I'll turn it off if you want," Nate said grudgingly.

*"In a related story," the reporter continued, "we now go live to the Boulder County Courthouse where we've just learned..."*

"Please." Marley rose to straighten the magazines on the coffee table.

*"...the sons of Dale and Diana Blake, who inherited Hunter Construction after the death of Karl Hunter, have filed—"*

Marley's head whipped toward the screen just as it went blank.

"Turn it back on!" She lunged for the remote in Nate's hand, then jabbed the power button twice before the TV flickered to life.

*"...scene with a live report. Alexia, what can you tell us?"*

Marley groped behind her for the edge of the coffee table and sat, eyes glued to the screen.

*"Thank you, Robin. It's been a busy morning here for the Blake family. Not only will Dale and Diana Blake be indicted for murder this morning, but we've just learned that Hunter Construction, owned by sons Justin and Jordan Blake, has filed Chapter 11 and the twins are here at the courthouse right now."*

Marley couldn't believe it. Hunter Construction, bankrupt. She couldn't imagine how Justin would deal with this on top of everything else.

*"You've been following this story, Alexia, explain how it's come down to this for such a well-known and respected company that's been a pillar of our community for so many years."*

*"Well, Robin, unfortunately, no matter how well respected the company and its owners have been in*

*the past, the citizens of Boulder can't seem to get past this scandal. A source close to the company said the last straw for the struggling Hunter Construction was when Jenkins Associates pulled the contract for their multi-million dollar project and awarded the bid to a different company..."*

Marley shot to her feet. "They lost the Jenkins job?"

"It's been pretty bad," Nate said. "Reporters have been following them around just like they've been camped out here. Justin and Jordan have refused to give any interviews, and people are speaking out against them."

She frowned. "Why? Who?"

He lifted a shoulder. "Tommy Berndt's family has been all over the news. Justin released an apology earlier in the week, but the news doesn't replay that like they do the rest of it. The fact that Justin was arrested that night hasn't helped, even though all the charges were dropped."

"He didn't do anything. What is wrong with people? Has anything been said that the guy who was killed was blackmailing them?"

Nate stared at her. "No...but—"

"I know, I know, that doesn't justify his death. I only meant that before they start crucifying Justin and Jordan for something their parents did, they should know this guy wasn't a completely innocent victim."

"They're just trying to sensationalize it as much as they can," Nate said. "Look, there they are now."

Marley turned back to the TV. As Justin and Jordan exited the courthouse, they were mobbed on the steps by reporters shoving microphones in their faces. She stared at Justin's face. She hadn't seen him in a week. He looked tired. God, her heart ached for him. If only—

*He doesn't want to see you, Marley. Move on.*

She sat back as tears stung her eyes. So much easier to think than actually do. Over the next few minutes as she watched the report, her anger reached a full boil.

"This is bullshit!" she exclaimed. "Whatever happened to unbiased reporting? I can't believe they're doing this." She gestured to the screen, indicating not only the reporters, but the individuals who'd 'stepped forward' to give 'interviews' trashing the twins. Frickin' idiots looking for five seconds of fame is what they were.

"Would I love to give them a piece of my mind—"

She sat up and looked at the door, then shot to her feet.

Nate's gaze followed her dash across the room. "What? What are you—oh."

She cast him one final glance before stepping onto the porch with a purposeful stride. The reporters who remained out on the street glanced up.

Usually, she refused to comment. She ignored them as she went about her business, and they went back to waiting. Now, fury simmering, she stood on the top step with her arms crossed and stared at the two men and one blonde woman. The dark-haired young man held her gaze. He tapped the other man without looking away from Marley, got up, and started across the lawn.

The woman reporter called inside her van before hurriedly following the dark-haired guy. Two others joined them with cameras.

"Ms. Wade?" the first man said hopefully.

Marley took a calming breath. "I want to make a statement."

\*\*\*\*\*

Justin watched Jordan weave toward the men's room and wondered for the tenth time what the hell he was doing here. He looked at the half-empty

pitcher of beer, then his full glass, and Jordan's empty one.

It was the third night this week he'd let Jordan talk him into coming out with him. The third night he'd watched his brother drink himself into oblivion. The second night he would drag Jordan's ass home. The first night, Colton had had the thankless job of dragging both their sorry asses home.

He'd have to remember to thank his friend. It wasn't a fun job, and he didn't want to do it on a regular basis, either. Yet he worried about Jordan and the habit he seemed to have formed rather quickly. It was the only reason he didn't just leave.

A valid reason that also answered his earlier question. He was here because he couldn't let his brother sit here and drink alone like some miserable, pathetic, drunken idiot. That, and, sitting at home left him way too much time to think about Marley.

Only the people around the bar didn't look at them like pathetic idiots. Each night, when they realized who'd come through the door, there was a moment of dimmed conversation. Then the whispers started, quick glances snuck over shoulders, outright stares. The immediate mood near him and Jordan became accusatory.

And because he and Jordan were carbon copies of each other, except in their style of dress and a slight difference in haircuts, no one really knew which of the two had been arrested that night. They only knew one of them had been. So they stared at the both of them like they were evil reincarnated.

Justin didn't give a shit, except for the fact that he saw it bothered the hell out of Jordan. It made Justin want to stand up and yell, "*It was me. Leave him alone!*"

But that would only draw more attention, so he remained silent and soberly endured their stares as Jordan drank. He'd tried to talk Jordan out of

coming tonight, but his brother had insisted only people who had a problem drank at home alone. Justin didn't believe that, but the look on Jordan's face kept the truth unvoiced.

Jordan had enough to deal with right now without his brother accusing him of being a drunk, no matter where he drank.

Justin glanced toward the bathroom again, wiping his thumb through the condensation along the side of his glass. His gaze skimmed the room and then caught on the television screen above the bar. Thinking he must be imagining things, he blinked and refocused through the dim light. Nope, he wasn't imagining a damn thing.

Marley's beautiful face filled the screen.

He rose from the booth and made his way closer to the bar without taking his eyes off the TV. A spot cleared at the bar as he approached, but he ignored that, motioning for the bartender to turn up the volume. After a moment, and a dark scowl from Justin, the guy complied.

"...earlier today," the news anchor said.

The screen cut to Marley standing on her front porch, speaking directly to the camera.

*"After watching the news for the first time today since Dale and Diana Blake were arrested, I'm appalled by the citizens of Boulder and their actions. I grew up here and I love this city, and I never would've expected to see Justin and Jordan Blake treated the way I saw today. They're being blamed for something their parents did, something they had no knowledge of. I only met them a few weeks ago, but in that time, I became friends with Justin Blake. He is a good, honorable man who did nothing wrong."*

*Friends.* Such an inadequate word for what she meant to him. She paused, and the camera zoomed in closer. He leaned forward, waiting for her next words with breathless anticipation.

*"I know beyond a doubt that he and his brother are as much victims in this as my mother and the man that was killed. We all want justice, but the sins of their parents should not be laid on the shoulders of these men. It's not right."*

Moisture seemed to brighten her eyes. Amazed she didn't blame him, touched by her sincere defense, Justin felt tears prick his own eyelids. Self-consciously, he blinked them away.

*"Marley, have you talked to Justin Blake since he was arrested?"* a voice asked off camera.

Anger flashed in her eyes. *"Why do you say it that way?"* she demanded. *"All charges against him were dropped. No, actually, none were even filed. Why is it you don't say that over and over again in your news reports?"*

*"So you have spoken to him?"*

Marley paused, then tilted her head slightly. A sad smile appeared briefly. *"No, I haven't spoken to him."* After a visible swallow, she softly said, *"And that makes this even worse...because I miss my friend."*

Abruptly, she turned and went back into the house. The feed cut back to the reporter behind the news desk, who moved on to another story.

Stunned, Justin sank onto the nearest barstool. What he'd just witnessed was not the face of a woman who hated him for what his parents had done. Her expression today was the identical twin to what he'd seen that night at the job site. *Before* she went in. An emotion that he didn't dare define but made his hope soar all the same.

He'd wanted to talk to her a million times this past week, had even driven past her house once or twice. Or five. But the news vans reminded him he had no right to disrupt her life just so he could feel better about what had happened, so he'd kept driving.

Nothing could stop him from seeing her now, and it had nothing to do with easing his guilt. He wanted a definition of the emotion in her eyes. He *needed* her definition.

Halfway to the door he remembered he had to get Jordan's ass home. A feat, he soon discovered, more easily accomplished when Jordan was completely drunk instead of just past buzzed.

The hour hand had crept toward nine by the time he arrived at Marley's house. Dusk settled in as the sun dipped behind the mountains to the west. Noting the news vans still parked in front of her place, he halted down the block. He didn't relish the possibility of them plastering his visit all over the ten o'clock news.

It only took a moment for Justin to decide to sneak through a neighbor's yard and go around to the back of the house instead of announcing his visit to all of Boulder. Then he felt like an idiot, sneaking through the trees in the lengthening shadows. He prayed no one saw him and called the cops.

Marley sat in a chair on the patio, mug in hand. The sliding doors appeared closed, drapes drawn. Seeing her made everything else in his life fade into the background. She was his sole focus.

A branch snapped loud under his foot. He jumped, swearing under his breath.

\*\*\*\*

Marley heard the noise and couldn't control a reflexive jerk of her hand. Hot tea sloshed over the rim of her mug to soak the front of her robe. After a muttered curse, she called out a warning to who she guessed was an overzealous reporter.

"You're trespassing and I have a gun."

A familiar chuckle reached her ears. "How could I have forgotten that?"

Marley froze. "Justin?"

"Hi." He stepped through the bushes and



hovered on the edge of the patio, as if hesitant about coming too close. Muted sound from Nate's action movie filtered through the closed patio doors to her left.

"Did you put that thing away already?"

"I was bluffing. I thought you were a reporter." She wiped at the tea spill, her pulse tripping so fast, she felt light-headed. "What are you doing here?"

"I saw you on TV."

Her hand stilled. Their gazes locked and she lost the ability to breathe. He took a step closer.

"God, I've been dying to see you again, Marley."

She frowned. "But, I thought...you said..."

"What?"

"You didn't want to see me. What happened was my fault."

"I never said that. Where'd you get an idea like that?"

Her gaze faltered.

"Who told you I didn't want to see you?" he insisted.

"Jordan did. He said—"

A growl of annoyance rumbled from his throat. "Forget what my idiot brother said," Justin ordered. "I'm here now."

Yes, he was, but did she dare hope? She smiled hesitantly.

His gaze dropped to the front of her robe. "Did I do that? Sorry."

She took a deep breath and said point blank, "It's not your fault, Justin."

"I didn't mean to scare you. I should've knocked at the—"

She shook her head. "What they did—Dale and Diana—I don't blame you at all."

He swallowed hard and dropped his gaze. But not before she saw the guilt in his eyes. "I still feel responsible."

"I know," she said. "That's what makes you *you*."

On impulse, she closed the distance between them and pulled him tight to her. Arms around his neck, she buried her face against his warm skin. After a brief hesitation, he closed his arms around her, tightening them just short of crushing her ribs. This was where she wanted to spend the rest of her life, but when it came down to it...would he be able to stay?

"Besides what Jordan said, I didn't come see you because I don't want you to feel guilty about what they've done," she whispered. "You take on too much, and if seeing me keeps it fresh..."

"I feel it whether I see you or not, but not seeing you is a hundred times worse," he admitted, his breath stirring her hair. "I'm sorry about everything. I was so damn scared I wouldn't be able to get them to leave. That I wouldn't be able to protect you."

He *had* been protecting her. Her heart swelled and she hugged him tighter. After a moment, she said, "You have to let it go, Justin."

His chest expanded against hers. "I will. In time."

"I've got lots of time."

His hands rubbed up and down the length of her back. "God, I've missed you."

Before she could agree, he dipped his head, searching for her mouth with his. Warmth radiated throughout her body, followed by a delicious tingle. Denied the chance to speak, she deepened the kiss, wanting him to know she craved the passion they'd shared a week ago. Justin's fingers caressed her face before he drew back from the kiss and rested his hands on her shoulders.

"Marley."

She caught her breath, only to lose it again when his serious expression gave her a nasty jolt of nervousness. Something was wrong.

"Somewhere in the craziness of all this, I fell in love with you."

Her pulse went haywire. Of all the things he could've said, she hadn't expected *that*.

"I know it's only been a few weeks, and I don't want to freak you out, but I—"

"Justin—"

"I had to let you know," he insisted. "We can take it slow. Whatever you want. Well, assuming you want—"

"I love you, too."

He looked surprised. "You do?"

"It shocked me, too," she admitted with a grin. "That day I quit, I saw you in the office...I felt like I'd been hit by lightning."

One corner of his mouth tugged up, quickly followed by the other.

"But that was the morning after Nate told me about your grandfather," she explained. "I thought I could pretend I didn't know anything, but it felt like a lie. I was afraid you'd want Nate prosecuted, so I said the first thing that came to mind."

"*I quit.*"

"I'd intended to say good morning."

"I would've preferred good morning."

She gave a half-laugh. "I thought if I didn't see you every day the feelings would go away."

"I'm glad they didn't." He captured her lips with his again. She pulled back this time and glanced toward the house.

"About Nate—no, let me finish. I know you have to do what you feel is right."

He shook his head. "Something Dad said that night got me thinking."

Marley frowned. "I don't remember him saying anything about Karl."

"I've listened to the tape a few times. There's this part, where he mentions Granddad's name. He

started to say something like *'it should've ended when I'*, caught himself, and changed his words."

"You don't think...?"

Justin shrugged. "I don't know. I don't want to know, really. Let's just say I believe Nate's telling the truth about Granddad being alive when he left. I don't see how an investigation will make any difference. We've all been through enough, and it's not over yet."

Marley held her relief at bay and asked, "You're sure?"

He nodded and pulled her close.

"What about Jordan?"

"You mean the interfering dumbass?"

She raised her brows. "I'm serious. Have you talked to him about it?"

"He's heard the tape. He's not ready to welcome Nate with open arms, but he doesn't want more scandal, either."

"How's he doing?" she asked with concern.

"It's hard for him, but I hope it'll get better after the trial."

Justin tightened his hold, and she leaned her cheek on his shoulder. She gave in to the temptation to press a kiss against his warm neck. When his hand rose to tilt her chin to his lips, it didn't take long before their enthusiasm threatened to flare out of control.

Reluctantly, she whispered, "Nate's inside on the couch."

"Hmm, okay." He removed his hands from inside her robe and placed them on her shoulders. "So...if we can't have any fun, there are other things we should talk about."

"Yeah?"

"Well, you know I had a job before all this," he began.

"Had?"

"Have," he clarified with a smile. "In Toronto."

"Toronto, Canada."

"You know any other?"

She laughed, but quickly sobered when she realized he lived his real life in an entirely different country.

"I took a leave of absence, but it's up in a few days. I'm sure I could ask for more time..."

When he didn't continue, her chest tightened and her stomach turned. His expression had become so serious. She lifted her chin. "Are you waiting for me to tell you to stay?"

Justin smiled. "You could do that, however, I think I have a better idea."

"Which is?"

He cleared his throat. "I'd been saving to start my own construction company, but now I'm hoping you'll consider a partnership. I'm thinking we'd call it Blake Construction."

Marley frowned. "You're asking me to be your business partner and you want to name the company *Blake* Construction? How do you figure?"

"Think about it."

She pushed against his chest and stepped back. "I don't have to think about it, but no way we'd only use your name. It'd have to be Blake and Wade, or Wade and Blake. Considering you'll have to cover the bulk of the initial investment, I guess Blake and Wade would be fair."

Justin shook his head and moved forward to cup her face in his hands. "Marley, I love you. I want an equal partnership with you, and I'd prefer to use only one name. *Think* about it."

The light bulb flared bright and a lump formed in her throat. Moisture burned her eyes. "Are you asking me to marry you?"

"What else would I be doing?"

She sniffed back the tears and smacked his

shoulder. "Then just ask me! You know by now that I don't go for all that read-between-the-lines-game-playing crap. If you want to—"

Another kiss shut her up for a long, delicious minute. Then his gaze captured hers with an intensity she felt deep in her soul.

"Marley Wade, will you marry me?"

She made him wait for a few seconds, until he shifted slightly and revealed he wasn't one hundred percent sure of her answer. Then she smiled.

"Blake Construction sounds perfect."

## **A word about the author...**

Wisconsin native Stacey Joy Netzel fell in love with books at a young age, so for her the graduation to writing them was natural. A member of Romance Writers of America and Wisconsin Romance Writers (WisRWA), she credits her parents for encouraging her dreams of becoming a published author, as well as the very talented friends she's made in WisRWA since joining in 2004. Her books have received numerous five-star reviews from reviewers and readers alike, and her Christmas anthology, *MISTLETOE RULES*, took First Place in WisRWA's 2010 Write Touch Readers' Award.

An avid reader and big fan of movies with happy endings, Stacey lives in Wisconsin with her husband and three children, a couple of horses and some barn cats. She works part-time as a travel agent, and in her limited free time she enjoys gardening, canning, and visiting her parents in Northeastern Wisconsin (Up North) at their cabin on the lake.

For more information, go to  
[www.staceyjoynetzel.com](http://www.staceyjoynetzel.com)





Thank you for purchasing  
this Wild Rose Press publication.  
For other wonderful stories of romance,  
please visit our on-line bookstore at  
[www.thewildrosepress.com](http://www.thewildrosepress.com)

For questions or more information,  
contact us at  
[info@thewildrosepress.com](mailto:info@thewildrosepress.com)

The Wild Rose Press  
[www.TheWildRosePress.com](http://www.TheWildRosePress.com)

