

ABSTRACT

SHARING TIME

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Sharing Time is a suspense/romance novel. Rene Matio, the main character, is a 33-year old woman whose life is torn between a dead lover, a jilted lover, a good friend, and two fathers—all involved in crime. Some of her past she would like to forget; some of it she would like to set right, but either way, she is faced with an FBI agent who wants her to take down her father's crime family and a man—an actor—who bears an uncanny resemblance to her dead lover. Rene uses her flippant, rather cocky, attitude to resolve her FBI troubles as well as the conflicts in her life. She is a serious, yet humorous, character whose love for betting on nearly any subject weaves her life away from her criminal past as well as the mentally disturbing images she experiences from the minds of people filled with horror and anguish.

SHARING TIME

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Chapter 1

Rene

“The FBI?” Rene Matio felt her temples tighten. She had no idea why—no, that wasn’t true—she knew exactly why the FBI wanted to talk with her, but she thought she’d left that behind when she left Ohio.

“Yeah, you know, one of those suit-and-tie types who carries a picture ID in his pocket?” Virginia continued thumbing through the rack of t-shirts.

“I know what they look like. Did he say what he wanted?”

Rene knew she shouldn’t get irritated. Virginia was a tad young and a little slow with the paperwork, but she was a whiz at sales and somehow knew exactly what to say when a customer hesitated over buying a Western-style suede jacket, complete with three-inch dangling fringe, to go with a leather skirt packed away in Boise. It went something like, “You know, this jacket would sure bring out the color of your eyes if you wore it with your skirt and this pale-blue silk tee we have over here.” In a shop like T-Shirts and Stuff, Virginia’s talent was a blessing.

“No, I don’t recall him telling me.” Virginia’s fingers paused. “Well, wait a minute. Yes, he did sort of say. He said he wanted to talk to you about someone you used to know. I told him I wasn’t sure what time you’d be in. He said he’d come back around one.”

Rene took a deep breath. She didn’t want to show any emotion. It would only breed suspicion, and she didn’t feel like having a suspicious employee on her hands. “Okay, just tell him to come on back to my office when he shows up.”

“Sure thing.”

Rene took her raincoat off and shook it with a snap. It was bad enough she just came from the bank where she learned she probably didn’t have enough money to make it through until spring. But now she had to deal with the FBI.

Making a livelihood from tourism in the Rockies wasn’t for the fainthearted. First, there was winter, which was okay since tourists loved skiing, and Big Mountain was nearby. But as winter progressed, it covered the towns, streets, and houses in enough snow that even the most adamant skiers shucked their snowsuits and went home. And when spring arrived, the snow

melted, pouring down the mountainsides like tears from the gods, leaving nothing but stagnant pools of muddy water. Tourism went blank. The residents of Whitefish hopped back and forth like kittens shaking their paws, trying their best to stay dry.

At least Virginia didn't ask any questions. Rene sent the last person packing who came around poking into her past. A reporter named Fred Starz, or was it Frank Starts? She couldn't remember.

Rene flung her coat across the file cabinet and looked at the clock. 12:57 p.m. Her office smelled like mold. She cracked open the small window behind her desk and sat down.

Why couldn't people get it through their heads her adoptive father was dead? No matter how many people wanted to know what Phil Matio did or how he managed to do it, they weren't going to find out now. He was just another brown lump of dirt in a cemetery full of brown lumps. He wasn't important any more.

Rene sat with her hands on her forehead, her elbows pinned to the desktop. Sure, Phil's death was only five years behind her, but her involvement with him had ended ten years ago, shortly after she turned twenty-three.

Rene shook her head. She opened a desk drawer and pulled out a picture of her seven-year-old self, all legs and sheepish grin, staring back at her from the center of yellowed borders. She was standing between Phil and her father. Phil had a big grin on his face and was holding a catfish he'd caught beneath the rotting, Cuyahoga river bridge. Her father, a little more somber, was holding nothing more than a fishing pole.

She couldn't remember who took the picture. She only knew it symbolized a part of her life she wished she could forget. But she had no idea she would wind up leaving two lovers—one dead and one jilted—as well as a good friend stuck in prison, in the wake of her former life.

“Ms. Matio?”

Rene dropped the picture and pushed her chair against the wall. The man's dark hair was cropped close. His pear-shaped face looked out-of-place peering through the office door. She could tell he was nervous. His leather briefcase moved from his right hand to his left and then back again.

“Yes?”

“Hello, my name is Agent Ted Rancey. I’m currently assigned to the Crime Prevention Unit with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.” His words rushed out, clipped with professionalism. He wrapped both hands around the handle of his briefcase and brought it forward like a groin shield. “I’d like to talk with you about your involvement with Phil Matio, if possible.”

Rene stood and extended her hand. “He’s dead.”

The agent blinked before he shook her hand. “Yes, we know.” His briefcase moved to the floor, and his hand motioned to the straight-backed chair beside her desk. “May I?”

Rene cocked her head. It wasn’t an invitation, but every situation had a heads and a tails. Telling him to leave was the heads in this particular situation. Not being able to tell him to leave was the tails. If she showed the slightest bit of hostility, he would read it as reluctance, and reluctance would be read as fear, and fear would be read as guilt somewhere down the line.

He sat down. His briefcase landed on her desk, and its brass clasps sprang open with a click.

Rene wondered how anybody could look so perfect. Midnight blue suit, white shirt, red power tie, everything perfectly proportioned, like an animated mannequin in a New York storefront. What was his name? She couldn’t remember.

He said, “Phil Matio passed on January 25th, 1984. He was 67 years old. He left a wife, an ex-wife, two children, and one adoptive daughter—you. You flew from Kalispell, Montana to Cleveland, Ohio on January 26th. You attended the burial service at Mount Zion Cemetery on January 27th. You flew back to Kalispell five days later after spending time with the Matio family.”

Rene leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs. It wasn’t long before an eight-by-ten photograph landed on the green blotter covering her desktop. She picked it up. The corners felt sharp to her fingers.

The agent continued to talk while Rene stared at the picture of Phil’s oldest daughter and herself. They were standing at the gravesite on the day Phil was buried. The picture was black-and-white, clear. Her legs looked laughingly knobby with the snow winding to a stop in front of her skirt. Her hair was loose, flared out behind her, frozen in a wild flick.

Catherine was staring off into space with her usual shy, round-eyed deer look. Even with the mounds of dirt and the high blasts of wind ripping at their black skirts, she and Catherine looked like exact opposites. Of course, their opposing nature was one of the things that had drawn them together since childhood. Catherine bubbling over in tears about some silly obscurity. A teacher's harsh words. A boy's hesitation to come up against her father. Or something truly as trivial as spilt chocolate milk on a powder blue skirt. Rene had a calming effect on Catherine, and Catherine had an emotional sensitivity Rene lacked.

Rene laid the picture back on the blotter.

The agent said, "We also know you met with several of the top men in the Matio crime family."

"I wouldn't call them a crime family, but yes, I went to my adoptive father's funeral and talked with some of his friends. So what's your point?"

"The Bureau keeps records. We know Mr. Matio adopted you on April 4, 1972, when you were sixteen and moved out of your father's house. We also know about your involvement in Mr. Matio's criminal activities from 1973 until 1979."

Rene let a smile spread across her lips. "If you know so much, why'd you wait ten years to talk with me? After all, it's 1989, isn't it?"

The man hardened as if she'd poured a bucket of ice water on him in mid-thaw. "Well, I didn't take over the case until three years ago. I worked with Ralph Myerson for two years before that."

"Ah, yes, Ralph." Rene clicked her tongue. "How is that short little ball of energy doing, anyway?"

"Dead."

"Oh." Her voice wavered.

"He died of a heart attack in 1984."

The cheeks of the agent loosened with what Rene thought sadness. She never considered federal agents having a life span. Ralph was always one of those guys she thought would live forever, like Columbo or Perry Mason—the eternal epitome of dedicated law enforcement in action.

Her mind wandered across the past and the neatly clipped Kentucky bluegrass lawn Phil insisted upon keeping. And how she walked across the white driveway the grounds keeper scoured daily with oil-soak abrasive, to where Ralph sat in his black Ford, bunched up among the latest stacks of newspapers, looking like a blemish on the corner of neatness, ready for another day of Phil-watching.

“Coffee?” she asked every morning.

“Don’t mind if I do,” Ralph always replied.

Cream. No sugar. She told him it showed his taste in women. Ralph never knew how to take her.

The agent in front of her cleared his throat. “Ralph was working on the case, trying to straighten out, or at least put a leash on it after your adoptive father’s death.”

Rene nodded, but she was having a hard time feeling sympathy for him, for anyone who befriended the former agent who followed her around for seven years of her life. She could imagine the trouble Phil’s death created. Phil was a neat little package. Short, stocky, dark—a true brute of a man who had a way of controlling the line between the illegal and the legal. Maybe because he didn’t look like a typical street thug. He was a short-sleeve cotton shirt kind of guy who hung out at the local diner, drinking coffee with local construction workers every morning and eating lunch with local politicians every afternoon. He wasn’t Mafioso. He wasn’t Italian, he didn’t break legs, and his business wasn’t big enough—nothing the Bureau would’ve even taken such an interest in if it hadn’t crossed state lines.

“I can’t say I’ve never beaten the shit out of somebody, or had the shit beaten out of them,” she recalled Phil once telling her. They were in his basement, shooting a game of nine-ball, his favorite way of doing business, especially when discussing his philosophies. “But most people respond better to reason.”

To Phil, reason was money. Money to the antique appraisers who spotted the items, money to the “rollouts” who stole the items, money to the “movers” who transported the items, money to the storekeepers who sold the items, and money to the local politicians and law enforcement who kept their mouths shut. Phil saw everything in terms of dollars.

“It don’t make sense. You make good money. Why you wanna leave?” he told her the day she said she was leaving.

“You don’t get it, do you?”

Phil laughed. His teeth looked yellow against the quarter moon of his mouth. Rene didn’t think it was funny. J.S. got arrested. She and Jake nearly got shot. All within twenty-four hours.

“Oh, I get it,” Phil said. “You’re blaming yourself for J.S., but what you haven’t figured out is that J.S. got himself into the mess.”

No, he didn’t, she thought. “Maybe,” she remembered saying. “Any luck putting a handle on all of it?” she asked the agent sitting across from her now.

“No, your father has gotten out of control.”

Rene took a sharp breath. She had no idea her father was now in charge of the business.

“That’s why the Bureau sent me out to talk with you.”

“Look, Agent—”

“Rancey. Ted Rancey.”

“Okay, look, Agent Rancey, I don’t know what your Bureau told you about me, but I didn’t leave Cleveland by accident.”

“You haven’t had any contact with your father, other than indirectly through your mother, for. . .,” he thumbed through the papers in his briefcase, “seventeen years.”

The information caused her eyebrows to pinch. Rene wondered how much more information this neat little agent had in his briefcase about the facts of her life, her new life. Or, at least, what the Bureau felt amounted to the facts.

“How about the vasectomy?” The analogy was odd, but Rene still thought it fitting.

He looked up. His calm fractured. A brief glint, just a second, but still, a glint of confusion crossed his face. “I’m sorry, I don’t—”

“You mean the Bureau didn’t tell you that I walked away from my family, my friends, and even my beautiful Spanish-style house with my two dogs and my very attentive twenty-year-old lover just to rid myself of the male corruption in my life?”

His face lost its question mark. “Yes, the Bureau is aware of everything you’ve done. That’s why we haven’t approached you before now.”

Rene didn't answer. What was she supposed to feel? Happy? Grateful her life included a federal dossier that allowed the FBI to decide when and if they should come to her shop, into her life?

"We simply thought that in light of the situation—"

"Agent Rancey, I suppose there's something else we need to get straight. I have a lawyer, a damned good lawyer, and I don't know what kind of arrangement you're trying to make here, but I'm not interested."

"You have to."

"Excuse me?" Rene couldn't believe it. How could this perfectly pedigreed federal punk walk in and tell her what she had to do?

"If we don't get your father under control, then you're—"

"I'm sure my father is quite capable of handling his own affairs."

"Yes, but—"

"No buts."

Agent Rancey took another picture from his briefcase. He tossed it on top of the picture of Catherine and herself. She felt her breath jab at her lungs. She didn't know what he expected, but, whatever it was, it was too much.

"If you don't deal with him, we will," Rancey said.

Rene stared at the picture. When did her father and Jake Batella hook up? Jake was with Phil when she walked out and left Jake holding the house, the dogs, the plants, everything without as much as a backward glance.

Rancey's statement was clear enough, though. It wouldn't be the first time the Bureau took somebody out, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Whether they convinced someone else to do it, or decided to do it themselves as a hidden operative, didn't matter. The results were the same. The person wound up dead.

"We know you put him into the business." Rancey picked up the pictures and snapped his briefcase shut. "You should be the one to take him out."

"I don't—"

"Just think about it. I'll be back in a week." Agent Rancey got up, ran his hand through his hair, and left.

Rene went to her office doorway and watched him walk out the front door, hop in his black Ford, and pull away from the curb. She stood there a moment, arms folded across her chest. She didn't care what Agent Rancey wanted. He wasn't going to get it. Her life was different now, and he couldn't force her into going back, not even to shut down her father's business. Let the FBI figure things out on their own.

She walked out into the store. Virginia was helping a woman and her teenage daughter pick through the clearance rack at the back of the store. A man, presumably the woman's husband, was standing by the boots. His eyes locked with hers for several seconds. He squinted. His eyes darkened.

Rene rubbed her forehead. Crap. Hadn't this day already held enough? Her eyes drifted to the girl. Straight, white-blond hair, not much more than fourteen, if even that, although quite well developed.

It was times like these, she hated her gift. Was it really a gift? Well, whatever it was, she didn't have much choice about it. Sometimes she saw the horrid acts people committed in the past, and she knew there wasn't anything she could do about them because she didn't know the particulars, only the acts themselves, filled with enough detail to make her retch. Other times she got brief flashes of the instant future. Wham. Wham. Wham. With those, she could at least reach out and pull someone back from the street or push a person out of the way of a flying object. They were easy. But, in this case, with this one particular girl, she looked into the eyes of the man, and she knew regardless of the outcome—acceptance, denial, or even anger—she couldn't walk away. There was nothing consensual about it, if such a thing was possible with a thirteen or fourteen-year-old child.

"Where are y'all from?" Rene asked them.

The girl's mother looked up and brushed a frizzy curl from her pudgy face. She was wearing a flowered cotton dress that looked like bib overalls with a pink, long-sleeved cotton shirt beneath. "Milwaukee."

"Nice place." Rene didn't know. She'd never been there. But at least the conversation gave her time to figure out an approach.

The man turned to the Stetsons, picked up one, and fingered the rim. His hair was dirty blonde, combed straight back. His black cotton dress pants looked out-of-place against his off-white western shirt. He had a string tie around his throat.

Rene motioned Virginia to help him while she went to help the girl and her mother. “You know what?” she said to the girl. “I think I’ve got something in my office that might work for you. It’s got a slight flaw in the design, so I can’t sell it, but I’ll bet it’s the right size for you, and I’d be more than willing to give it to you if it fits.”

The girl looked at her mother, her blue eyes shining with question. Her mother glanced at the man, who was now staring at the three of them.

“Care if I show it to her?” Rene asked the girl’s mother.

“No, not at all.”

The mother turned back to the clearance rack while Rene led the girl back to her office. Rene sifted through a stack of t-shirts piled on her cabinet and produced a light blue one with a picture of a fawn on it and the words *Living Wild in Montana* written in silver glitter.

“Are you sure I can have it? It’s beautiful,” the girl said when Rene handed it to her.

“Sure, is that your father checking out the hats?”

“Stepfather.” The girl looked at the floor.

Rene hesitated. It wasn’t that she hadn’t approached something like this before, but the reaction was always negative, and the girl looked so young, barely out of childhood. “Hey, you wanna fill out your name and address for our free t-shirt drawings?”

“Okay.” The girl’s eyes moved from the floor back to Rene.

Rene handed her a piece of paper and a pen. The girl took them and leaned over to write her information in a neat, round cursive. Rene could hear the clock ticking on the wall. “Are you in high school yet?”

“No, well, not until fall. Then I’ll be starting Williams.”

“Williams High School?”

“Yeah, have you heard of it?” The girl put a piece of hair in her mouth and chewed at it.

“No, not really. I just liked the sound of it.”

The girl released the piece of hair from her mouth and smiled. “Me, too.”

Rene took the paper from the girl's hand and stared at the address. *Lydia Dent, 498 West Albert Drive*. That should do it. "How long has your step-father been molesting you?"

The girl looked up, her blue eyes startled. "I—"

"Does your mother know?"

Tears welled to the surface, and the girl dropped the t-shirt. "How did you know?"

"It doesn't matter. I just do."

The girl's eyes darted around the room.

Rene thought she looked like a deer caught in a spring-loaded bear trap. She hated this part, the knowing, the seeing things she never wanted or asked to see in the eyes of complete strangers, but what was she supposed to do? Forget it? Let this child go back to her stepfather without saying anything?

Rene went to the door and motioned to the girl's mother. "Ma'am, could you come back here a second and tell us what you think?"

The girl blinked.

Rene reached down to pick up the t-shirt from the floor and handed it back to the girl.

"It's time to tell her, sweetie."

Chapter 2

J.S.

James “J.S.” Seitz looked out the window across the cropped fields. The barbwire-topped fence that marked the Allen Correctional Institute loomed in the background like dusty lace. Small beads of rain splattered the window and raced downward like tadpoles, or what J.S. thought tadpoles would look like. He didn’t know. His life was controlled. Mopping floors. Stirring torso-sized pots in the canteen. Watching television. The outside didn’t even look real any more.

“What’re you doing there, boy?” Hank asked.

J.S. turned, his body still facing the second-story window and his arms leaning heavily on the splintered mop handle his compadre, his brother in bars, his cellmate, Andre, used to spear the first layer of glass last week. The doctors said Andre just lost it, couldn’t take the constant pacing back and forth in one space any more. J.S. understood. The last seven years of his life held the same.

“Just looking,” J.S. said.

Hank tapped his hand on his baton. “Well. . .you may as well get away from it.”

J.S. felt his forehead knot and his mouth pinch at the sound of Hank’s drawl. Ohio wasn’t any place for a southern accent. It brought bigots out of the woodwork.

“Looking only makes the time spread,” Hank said.

J.S. didn’t move. He knew Hank didn’t expect him to. What could he expect? He was just a guard doing a guard’s work in a guard’s way. At least he didn’t make the inmates feel like that haggled-down Rottweiler on the news the other night.

The television screen had flickered. J.S. had folded his arms tightly across his chest. There was the Rot, on display for the whole world to see. The Cuyahoga County Humane Society workers dragged him out from beneath a broken-down porch. Its neck looped with two plastic chokers at the ends of long metal poles. Its body lunging forward and backward, rushing one loop and pulling against the other, snarling and biting at the camera.

J.S. remembered thinking he felt the same way the day the transfer guards dragged him out of the van by his elbows and led him, shackled, with his hands and feet linked in one

continuous plastic capital “I” into the prison. He couldn’t get his arms and feet into rhythm. His feet stumbled in the loose rocks and he fell, face first.

“Suppose so,” J.S. said, the Rot still on his mind.

Hank’s blue stare stayed steady. J.S. didn’t know what Hank was thinking. He never did.

J.S. pressed his foot down hard on the mop wringer as Hank strode off down the hallway and the clink-clink-clinking of guard keys disappeared in the distance. The water in the gray bucket turned darker, coming closer to the color of the metal bucket than anything he could use to wash the grit away from the slick concrete.

J.S. pulled the dirty cotton twists of his mop through the wringer and stared at himself in the window. His nose looked broader. His body seemed stretched taller than its natural six-foot, two-inches. He looked fatter. One hundred and seventy-two pounds didn’t look that wide, did it?

Reaching up, he plucked a piece of lint from his nappy hair. He didn’t want to get out any more. Why bother? What would he do? Who would he see? His family was gone. Not that he thought he could count on them in the first place. His mother, her Cisco and her boyfriends, was all that mattered there. And his father—well, his father went heels and elbows the day he turned thirteen.

J.S. shook his head and went back to mopping. The mop head sloshed when he slopped in on the concrete. He could still feel the coarse, nylon loop couch in his mother’s living room where he sat, watching Bill Cosby reruns, waiting for his parents to come home and light the candles on some stupid cake. Maybe chocolate with white icing. Something from the stacks of dented boxes in the day-old cart at Fulmer’s. That would’ve been nice. They could’ve sung Happy Birthday to him like a real family.

J.S. felt the weight of his chest. He pushed the mop hard against the concrete wall. Instead, his mother brought him home a Little Debbie Snack Cake with a candle shoved through the cellophane. It looked like a stab wound wrapped in plastic. He didn’t know what happened to his father. None of it quite stuck until he turned seventeen and took up out of there.

It wasn’t until eight years later that the judge passed sentence on him. His mother didn’t show. His father didn’t, either. Not that he expected either of them to give a shit, especially

after eight years and not one single boo-do or howdy-do. Nobody but Rene Matio showed, and she sat in the back with tears running down her face. Buddy Hanes, his best friend, the only other person who gave a shit, was dead. And Jake Batella, his so-called partner? Well, like he expected the bastard to show, anyway.

J.S. couldn't do anything except stand there, his feet frozen flat to the floor, feeling the same lump in the pit of his stomach he felt the day his mother brought that stupid excuse for a birthday cake home. He understood why he beat the shit out of the guy. He might have let Old Dude slide if the wrinkled old fart just took a shot at them. After all, they were robbing him, weren't they? Old Dude had a reason to shoot at them, but not to push things beyond what they were doing, not to shout the one word that separated everything.

"You fuckin' nigger!" Old Dude spat that word to the ground like a piece of bad chicken. His cheeks reddened. His eyes bulged out like a bullfrog.

It didn't seem to matter that J.S., Rene, and Jake were a chocolate-vanilla swirl; that Rene was the blend between himself and any partner they were working with; that she, with her Shawnee-Mexican-German mix, was the one who brought things together. No, Old Dude didn't care about any of that shit. He just boiled it down to one thing.

"You fuckin' nigger!"

J.S. could still feel the anger tightening in his chest. He didn't want to feel mad, but he just couldn't get over the idea that Old Dude got what he deserved.

How many crazy-ass people would go after someone holding a shotgun? J.S. shook his head. Old Dude didn't even see it coming when he grabbed the shotgun.

"Nigger this, muthafucka!" J.S. remembered shouting, as he stood there, his arm swinging downward, blood covering his hands and the butt of the shotgun.

Rene came back to pull him off. It was too late, though. His fingerprints were everywhere, the very thing Phil Matio told them not to do.

"Never, and I mean never, leave fingerprints. Don't touch nothing if you ain't wearing gloves, and if you do, don't come crying to me. It ain't gonna do you any good." That was Phil's standard line.

The police didn't waste any time, either. He was never convicted of anything before. Never arrested except once when they picked him up as a runaway. But once was all it took.

One fit of anger. One set of fingerprints. And his life was gone with the slam of a judge's gavel for the next twenty-five years.

Whatever. J.S. slopped the mop head back in the bucket and spun it around. He could feel the round, splintered tip of the handle pushing against the skin on his forearm. His face felt warm, and his long mahogany hand reached up, brushing a tear away from his face. "Don't be stupid," he told himself. He got what he deserved, and he knew it.

The sound of a buzzer pulled him away from his thoughts. It grated from the metal box hanging at the top of the ceiling along the crack running down the hall. He could smell boiled chicken. Time for lunch. Dinner would be in another five hours. He could go to bed another five hours after that.

Chapter 3

Jake

“How old were you the first time you did it?”

Jake Batella watched a drop of water twist down the bell of the wine glass in front of him. A waiter snaked between the tightly placed tables to remove the dessert plates from the white linen. The scent of oregano hung in the air, mixed with the young woman’s floral perfume, lilac perhaps.

“Young,” he said. “I was very young.”

The young woman returned his smile. He expected she would. What was her name? Annette? Jeannette? Something-ette. It didn’t matter. She looked the same as all the others. All brunettes. All big-breasted. All long dark hair. The only difference was they were young, and at thirty, he didn’t feel young any more.

“I was fourteen,” she announced. “The guy was a jarhead home on leave.” She brought the wine glass to her lips and sipped lightly at the clear liquid inside. Her lips pursed as though she was sucking pulp from a nectarine. “We did it three times.”

“That’s nice.”

She returned the glass to the wet spot on the tablecloth. Her bottom lip pouted.

Jake placated her. “I couldn’t count the number of times I did it with my first.”

He didn’t like the game. What was he supposed to tell her? That he didn’t make love to a woman until he was eighteen? That the woman was twenty-two and looked like her, like both of his ex-wives, like every woman he dated since? That he made a complete ass out of himself?

The girl ran on, talking about what she wanted for her life, if only she could make the right connections. Jake recalled thinking the same when he and Rene Matio first met. He was seventeen, hanging out at the Stop-n-Save, looking to steal a pack of cigarettes, when Rene walked up and shoved a five in his shirt pocket.

“Buy them. Don’t steal them,” she said. “It isn’t worth doing six months for something so petty.”

At the time, he thought it strange, her standing there, leaning on a Right Freeze icebox, her hands shoved in her pockets. No shopping. No talking. Just watching. But it didn't take long for him to find out why.

She followed him outside. "You wanna make some real money?"

Ten minutes. She explained it flat. And he liked the sound of it. Two months on the street was enough. Rolling drunks wasn't a living. Not that he blamed his father for kicking him out. He didn't. He deserved it. Too bad his parents died before he had a chance to tell them. But life moved on, and Rene's offer was the first decent thing he'd heard, so he took her up on it and went to work for Phil Matio. Garth Agite didn't come until later. And what happened with Rene was what put the young woman in front of him now.

"What made you pick me?" the young woman asked.

"Your hair, your eyes, your smile, and..." Jake hesitated, letting his eyes wander down her throat to the scooped neckline. "Your breasts."

The young woman laughed. She didn't sound like Rene. Her laugh came from the nose. Rene laughed from her throat like a mountain lion taking deep, slightly restricted breaths. Of course, she didn't look quite like Rene, either. Her nose was too prominent.

"A lot of men are like that." The young woman twined a string of pearls tight around her throat.

Jake tapped his fingers on the table. He felt like going home. She was no match for Rene. No chance of her throwing him against a wall, stripping his pants down, and climbing on his stick. Not like Rene. But he knew himself too well to stop. "Do you want to go to your place or mine?"

The pearls fell into the sharp space between her breasts. Her hair curled around the black straps of her dress. Her eyes shone as dark as her hair. "You pick."

Jake drained the tall, crystal glass in his hand and reached inside the silk lining of his suit coat to retrieve his wallet. "Yours." It was less complicated, or would be when it ended.

The routine was simple. A few telephone calls. Some flowers. Dinner. The next thing he knew, he was maneuvering his pert BMW through the catacomb of streets on the west side of Cleveland, wondering about the stars in Whitefish, Montana, where Rene moved ten years ago.

The distance was like the final slap in the face. Nothing permanent. That's how she referred to their relationship. "Oh, you know, we're just having fun, sharing a little time together. It's nothing permanent."

She was right. He went to work with her in 1976, and moved in with her a year later. They had a great time until she split in 1979. He still wondered why she did it, why she left without as much as a "screw you," "kiss my ass," or anything.

The girl's apartment looked like all off-campus housing. Lace, flowers, a few artistic prints, and a sparse array of mismatched furniture scattered along off-white walls. It reminded him of the apartment he and Susan, his first wife, took.

Susan was nice. Twenty-two. Knew her own mind. Slammed him down more than once and beat the mattress with him. Of course, it turned out the same as the others. She wanted more. Talking, sharing, dipping inside his thoughts. Things he couldn't give.

Discussing work was out-of-the-question. He didn't like talking about his life, or how he came to be the person he was, or what type of person he hoped to become. His past was his past, and he was the person he planned to remain. There wasn't much else to it.

Rene never cared about all of that touchy-feely stuff. That's what he liked about her. She stayed in the present—where her next dollar was coming from, how they were going to hit the next house, when she was going to get her next lay. Not that she laid everybody, only two men before him. She just knew what she wanted and how to take it.

Jake wondered if the young woman standing before him now knew what she wanted. He watched, rubbing the corner of his mouth with interest, as she tugged at the zipper on the back of her dress. The rayon slid to the Oriental rug like a black ring of tar, staining the flowered design.

Moving forward, he kissed the mounds of olive colored flesh molded above the black half-circles of her bra. The act progressed quickly.

"Do you like different positions?" she asked.

"What?" The harness of her legs weighed against his shoulders.

"Different positions."

Force it, Jake thought, but he knew she wouldn't. She wasn't aggressive enough. So he flipped her onto her knees. Her dark hair made an alluvial fan on the cream-colored silk of the pillow. But her talk ruined it—the reason he wanted to have sex with her in the first place.

“Hmm,” she said. “This is okay, but . . .”

Jake pushed harder, reaching up, grabbing the string of pearls barely visible through her hair. His fingers tightened and pulled. The pearls felt smooth wrapped around his palm. He quickened his thrusts. Shut up bitch shut up bitch shut up bitch shot thought his head.

“Stop! You're hurting me!”

He felt his body stiffened. The rush of blood and fluid shook through his groin. The beads slackened. He was through. Thank God. She was worse than talk radio.

“What the hell was that?” she demanded.

Jake ignored her. He tugged at the zipper on his wrinkled silk pants.

Her eyes glared. “So is that it? Is that the way you intend to treat me?”

“What did you expect?”

“Something a sight better than that!”

“I thought you said you wanted to meet Garth Agite. That you thought he could help you. Remember? The right connections?”

She folded her legs and drew the sheet to her chin.

“Well, I'll be back next week, and then I'll bring him around to meet you the week after.” Jake stood, hand-raking his dark hair in the mirror. He knew his looks attracted women. Short, stocky, half Italian. But whether women preferred the type of sex he wanted was always in question.

Her nostrils flared. “Is that how it works?”

Jake shrugged his suit jacket over his broad shoulders and straightened his tie. “I assumed you knew.”

She frowned.

Garth would do him the favor. Meet her. Talk with her. Have sex with her maybe. Set her up with something. No big deal. It wasn't like either one of them wanted anything from her.

“See you next week?” Jake asked.

The girl didn't answer. She didn't get up, either. He didn't care. The door into the corridor was only a short distance from the bedroom. The staircase loomed out around the oak banisters, and the bulb at the top of the fifth floor was blown. But the other floors were well lit, and his car was still intact when he hit the street. Good. The last time he came into the college district, his driver's window got shattered.

The moon was still clear and the stars looked like freckles hanging in the blackness. He stopped to light a cigarette. He needed to get Rene Matio out of his head.

Chapter 4

Rene

“So have you decided?”

Rene sighed. Why couldn't the knock at the door be something exciting, or at least normal?

“Yes, Agent Rancey, I've decided, and I've already told you. The answer's no.”

Rancey stood at the top of the wooden staircase leading up the side of the apartment, his briefcase in hand, his weight shifting from one foot to the other. He wore a suit identical to what he wore the week before. Midnight blue with a starched, white cotton shirt. A different tie, though. One not quite as wide, with black and lighter black diamonds running at an angle across his chest.

He asked, “May I come inside?”

Rene stepped onto the landing beside him. She looked across the rooftops and then the street. From the vantage point above her store, she could see three-quarters of Whitefish: the bank on the corner, a small grocery shop two blocks down, two taverns and three diners within a three block radius. Small tourist towns were compact, if nothing else.

Rancey's black Ford was parked at the front curb beside Ralph Myerson's dented blue Chevy. Her yellow 1967 Deuce was parked in the back, to the side. Nothing. No one. At least not anyone she could see.

“It'll only take a second,” Rancey said. “We could go to the diner, if you prefer. I can see how having a strange man inside your apartment might make you feel uncomfortable.”

Rene snorted. Worse things than Rancey landed on her doorstep. Not since she moved to Montana, but more times than she could count in Ohio. “Rollouts,” especially the young ones she recruited, had a habit of thinking that since she hooked them up with Phil and taught them how to steal, she could get them out of whatever jam they got themselves into.

“Are you wearing a gun?” she asked.

“Not at the moment.”

Rene didn't believe him. He was an agent, an FBI rodent, and not even as nice as his predecessor. “Good, I have one, it's loaded, and I know how to use it.”

Rancey raised an eyebrow.

“Just thought you should know.” She swung the door open.

Rancey stepped inside and stood in the middle of her living room, or what might be considered her living room, if her apartment wasn't a loft. The corner she called a bedroom consisted of an old-fashioned feather bed with a matching dresser and nightstand. The kitchen had a L-shaped counter with a set of old, but functional appliances. The sun glared through blue and white checked curtains above the sink. A painted cable spool and two ladder-back chairs separated the kitchen from the rest of the apartment.

Rancey's eyes moved from one area to another. Rene wondered if he was assessing her or making sure she didn't have someone with a machine gun hiding in the corner. Finally, he took a seat, settling in on the sofa, an old brocade Salvation Army reject. His briefcase plopped onto the coffee table. Rene sat down in one of the two overstuffed chairs and stared at the towering state-of-the-art Pioneer stereo on the opposite wall. Low music drifted from the speakers.

She didn't have a television. She hated television. Music was one of the three things she did for entertainment. A card table with two folding chairs, sitting in the corner closest to the door with a half-completed puzzle spread across it, presented the second. Two lofty bookcases, functioning as a partial wall around her sleep area, made of two-by-fours and bricks and laden with the appropriate classics pointed to the third.

The total—along with her clothes, a few wall hangings, knick-knacks, some kitchenware, four lamps, and her car—comprised the sum of her personal belongings. Life was good.

“Make it quick,” she told Rancey. “I'm kinda busy” Although she wasn't in the least, other than thinking about making a run to the grocery store to pick up some spaghetti for a butter, garlic and noodle dinner until an Allman Brothers Band hour came on the radio and sidetracked her. With only one decent rock-n-roll station in a hundred mile radius, mostly 80s music, something from the 70s sounded too appealing to resist.

Rancey sprang the clasps on his briefcase. “I think I have an offer that might interest you.”

“I doubt it.”

Rancey didn't smile. He didn't look up. His hands dug through the briefcase in front of him. “Perhaps I need to explain the offer before you make a decision. We know your good

friend, someone you've known for a long time and still communicate with, is housed in the Allen County Correctional Institute in Lima, Ohio."

Rene felt her eyebrow pop up. She didn't want it to. But there it went. Up like a frown.

"If you agree to help us put an end to your father and Jake Batella's operations, we would, in return, get your friend released from prison and have his record expunged."

"Anything else?" It wasn't that she wanted more. She didn't. She just wanted to see what Rancey was willing to offer. How much he wanted her.

"We could offer you immunity from prosecution."

Rene laughed. "Prosecution for what?"

Rancey's expression remained deadpan. The furnace kicked on and blew hot air. Clicking sounds came from the vents, erasing the chill.

"Look, Agent Rancey," Rene said, "let's be blunt, shall we?"

"Please do."

"If someone had a case against me, they would've brought it a long time ago. I'm ten years out, and I've talked with my attorney. I'm clean. You can't do anything to me."

"Things happen."

Rene frowned. She understood the insinuation. The Bureau had a way of making things happen.

"But that isn't our intention," Rancey said. "What we're interested in, is knowing what you would be willing to do for us in exchange for getting your friend out of prison."

Rene smiled. Ah, that's more like it. She wanted to decide, not Rancey. She couldn't deny considering the possibility over the last week. Freeing J.S. was the only interesting bait the Bureau had to offer. "I don't know."

Rancey pushed out another question. "Don't you think you owe it to us for putting Jake Batella into the game?"

"No, he's the one who decided to stay."

"Do you have any idea how big your father is now?"

She tapped her fingers on the arm of the chair.

Agent Rancey cleared his throat. "Taking over Mr. Matio's business was. . .well, it didn't even constitute a quarter of your father's business holdings. He's been part of the drug trade

since the mid to late 60s. He owns several small porn studios with the first producing films as early as 1966. He also runs a tri-state prostitution scam—more snare and roll than actual prostitution, but still illegal and, by our best estimate, fully operational since the early 70s.” Rancey stopped and took a breath. “Shall I go on?”

Rene shrugged. Her father was a jerk. Nothing new about that. He had jerk stamped on his forehead like a trademark. She also knew he didn’t work in the traditional sense. No workplace to visit. No regular hours. He didn’t lead a high-profile life—not like Phil who treated his family well and spent money as fast as he made it. But maybe that was the point. Lay low. Stay away from the magnifying glass.

Rancey said, “He’s involved in credit card, loan, and small business fraud, as well as the antique trade he took over from your adoptive father.”

“The antique trade. What an interesting way to put it.”

“I assume you know what I mean.”

Yes, she did, but she wasn’t going to admit it. She couldn’t count the number of B&E’s she committed while she worked under Phil. They always went after specialty items—antiques ordinary people had. If people only knew that every time they called an appraiser to give them a dollar figure on things they cherished, that they were risking a break-in, she was sure they wouldn’t do it. They would guess at the value, or visit an antique shop with a picture, or point the item out in an advertisement listed in an antique trader magazine, so their insurance agent could list the value rather than letting an appraiser scribble it on a scrap of paper. Especially an appraiser on Phil’s payroll.

“Tell me, something, Agent Rancey,” Rene said. “Have you ever killed anyone?”

He blinked. “Yes. Why do you ask?”

“No particular reason. Just wondering.” Rene stared at him for a second. His crystal blue eyes locked on hers. Nothing. Nada. No pictures whatsoever. She wondered why she didn’t get any flashes from him. Was it because the killings were legal? Or was it because Rancey didn’t feel remorse about committing them?

“You?” Rancey asked.

“Me what?”

“Have you ever killed anyone?”

Rene let a smile come to the corner of her lips. “No, but I suppose there’s a first time for everything.”

Rancey looked at his briefcase. “Well, if that’s how you decide to handle your father, I’m not sure I can protect you with immunity.”

“I wasn’t talking about my father.”

“Is that a threat?” Agent Rancey’s eyes met hers. They were hard with a you-don’t-want-to-screw-with-me glint.

“No, it was a joke, Agent Rancey. Just a joke. You don’t have a very good sense of humor, do you?”

“I don’t consider murder a laughing matter.”

Rene reflected on the slight shake of Rancey’s hands. Maybe her father bothered Rancey more than he let on. “So, how is my dear old dad?”

“He’s been in and out of the hospital.”

“I see.” Rene wondered why her mother left this information out of her weekly reports. Every Sunday, 8:00 p.m.—whether Rene wanted to talk or not, or even whether she wanted her mother’s reports or not. They came like a well-scheduled train. Except for her father’s illness.

Rene’s thoughts skirted across her mother, an enigma in a short, brown frame with her hair worn in a tight bun. A woman who lived in an average suburban house amidst what Rancey now described as a criminal empire. A woman who kept her eyes screwed shut. A woman complicit of her husband’s cruelty, even when that cruelty extended to her only child and signing away her parental rights on neatly typed court paper.

A piece of her mother’s reasoning was justifiable. She had no perceivable skills beyond wife, mother, and homemaker. Her prime ticked by somewhere in the late 50s when a half Mexican, half Shawnee woman meant nothing. Heck, even with only a quarter of each, and even in the late-80s, and even in western Montana situated way up in the Rockies, Rene felt the disdain for brownness. But she made peace with it a long time ago. Ignore the bigots. Move on. Live her life however she wanted. Not that Whitefish was a hot bed of racism.

Her mother was different, though. At fifty-eight, she was too stubborn to change, too old to start over, and too Catholic to get a divorce. Closing her eyes, accepting whatever abuse, verbal or otherwise, was probably what she considered best.

Rene shook her head and pulled her legs beneath her. Agent Rancey sat straight and folded his hands in his lap. His actions shouted a need for an immediate answer. Instead, Rene yawned and started picking her cuticles, two, three, four, slowly, before her eyes drifted to the window. Fat snowflakes floated past, furious, like cold anger. She wanted to feel indifferent, but somehow she couldn't.

“So are you interested?” Rancey asked.

“Maybe,” she said, “on a few conditions.”

Chapter 5

J.S.

J.S. woke, jumped from his bed, looked in the mirror, and then pinched himself. He couldn't believe his luck. Or was it just a dream? The same dream he had every night for the first three hundred and sixty-five nights he spent in prison. His hand grabbed at his orange uniform pocket. The plane ticket was still tucked away in its neat envelope.

"What a beau-ti-ful mor-ning," he started wailing. "What a beau-ti-ful day."

Andre rolled over in his bunk and rubbed his eyes. "Shut the fuck up! I'm trying to sleep."

"You shut the fuck up!" J.S. grabbed the pillow from his bunk and beat his cellmate over the head with it.

Andre rolled over, snatched the pillow from J.S.'s hands, and pulled it over his head.

"Chump," J.S. said.

"What-the-fuck-ever."

J.S. thought about how his reactions had changed. When he first came to prison, he would've grabbed Andre by his short-and-curlyes and yanked him right out of his bunk. Now, he just smiled and continued singing until he jumped up, smacked the ceiling and shouted, "I'm getting out of this mutherfuckin' place!"

"Yeah, and I'm Martin Luther King."

"Well, then get ready to climb those Lincoln Memorial steps, bro, 'cause I'm leaving your skinny white ass behind today."

Andre rolled over in his bunk and stared at J.S. with his mouth gaping open.

"Better shut that thing if you don't wanna draw flies."

J.S. didn't have the chance to tell Andre last night. The prison Warden didn't let him go until almost 9:00 p.m., and Andre was sound asleep by the time J.S. made it back to the cell. It took every ounce of strength he had to keep from waking him.

"You're kidding, right?" Andre asked.

"Nope, bro, it's happening."

J.S. didn't know how or why, but he sure knew who. Rene Matio was the only person who could get him out fifteen years early without so much as a parole hearing and with a plane ticket to Whitefish, Montana. He also knew Rene Matio was the only one who cared enough to bother. Ten years in prison, and little brown girl wrote every week.

The faster he worked as shoving his stuff in the box the Warden gave him, the more his mind flitted across the past. At first, he went from the start forward, but that didn't feel right. So he started moving from the present back. At last, his mind landed on the right year. 1969. That's when he first met Rene.

He had his first 'fro, stood out a full foot from his head, and a set of wide-stripped bell-bottoms. Buddy Hanes had a Fu Manchu wrapped around his mouth and his chin. They were both eighteen and lagging behind in school. He remembered their first encounter. It was in the high school cafeteria at the start of what should've been their last year. He was bopping along, lunch tray in hand, when Buddy swung around and ran smack into him. Food hit the floor. They both glared at each other.

"Mutherfucker."

"Asshole."

The fight was on. Buddy grabbed him in a chokehold. He twisted out and brought Buddy to the floor. A knife snapped out and went to the other's throat. Who said what and did what didn't matter. It took one Assistant Principal and two boffed up teachers to pull them apart, and once they were both free, they went after the Assistant Principal for putting his nose into their business.

That was the end of high school for both of them. The Principal expelled them for a month, but for some dumb reason, they decided not to go back. Instead, they spent the next nine months running the streets and hanging out like thieves.

Thieves. J.S. laughed. If they only knew then, things might have turned out different. It was hard to tell after life went on down the road.

Buddy sure was a white boy full of plans, though. Some of them good. Some of them plain cracker dumb.

J.S. remembered riding down the streets lined with boarded up houses, watching the crank heads hocking their wares on the corner when Buddy said, “We need to get us some money.”

J.S. snorted. “You ain’t lying there, bro.”

They were only out of school a month, but both of their parents were on them. Bring in some money or get the hell out. No free rides.

Buddy nodded. “Ever hear of Phil Matio?”

“No.”

It didn’t take long for Buddy to explain Matio and how the money worked. Buddy figured if he could meet either Matio’s daughter, or maybe a niece, he might have a shot at getting in, and if he got in, he could bring others in, too.

J.S. slid down in the seat of Buddy’s 1966 Chevy Nova. The streets were blank, except for a pair of puffed up blonde chicks. The taller one waved. Buddy hollered. J.S. ignored them.

He and Buddy were different when it came to girls. Buddy went for the easy types—mini-skirts up to the crotch and tight psychedelic t-shirts. J.S. preferred feisty girl. Looks didn’t matter.

The Deuce sure was one big hunk of chick magnet metal, though. Custom paint job. Light blue metallic flick with dark blue trim. One of Buddy’s pals painted the words Street Rider across the back end of it. Buddy said he decided to let it stick. J.S. figured the name was about right.

The chrome job more than made up for the engine roar. He and Buddy spent one whole afternoon—before either one of their parents, or maybe he ought to say before either parent, since Buddy’s dad was it and J.S.’s mom was it after his father split—but they took the time, before both parents started bitching, to jack up the Deuce and slap L-60s on the rear axle.

Man, it looked good. Angled downward like an Indian arrow. Tires sticking out on both sides. They topped it off with chrome rims, chrome side pipes, and chrome wheel stands. By the time they were done, it looked like one rolling shiny ball of metal.

Buddy took the inside for granted, but J.S. didn’t. The black vinyl bucket seats and the headliner looked like they spun out of the factory. The roll bars and small padded steering wheel topped it off, smooth with a capital “S.”

The engine didn't impress the girls, but it always made the guys whistle. 427 big block with blueprinted 660 Holley carburetors topped off with a Hurst four speed. J.S. had the specs down pat.

Later, J.S. remembered running his hand slowly down its sleek body and saying, "Man, oh man, I bet this baby can move."

Buddy laughed. "You wanna find out?"

"You bet."

The next thing he knew, the keys came out of Buddy's pants pocket, sailing through the air and right into his hand. Never before had anyone let him drive something even close to the Deuce. His mother and a couple of uncles had let him drive their old hoopties, but the deuce wasn't no hooptie, and he couldn't believe his pal was going to let him drive it.

Buddy shut the hood and walked around to the trunk. He took something out, but J.S. couldn't see what. Leaning through the driver's window, he watched Buddy flop on the passenger seat and push an eight-track player into a hand made metal mount. A few twisted wires underneath the dash, and Buddy explained, "Tunes, you ready?"

J.S. didn't need to hear the words twice. At first, he just grabbed the steering wheel and shoved the key into the ignition. But then, he thought better, adjusted the seat, and twisted both mirrors to match his height. Buddy was a short white boy—five feet nine inches, or maybe five feet ten. J.S. needed a little more legroom and a lower seat to see what was going on around him.

"Route 23?" Buddy asked.

"Okay." J.S. didn't care.

Buddy popped in an eight-track and twisted up the volume. Sometimes J.S. just couldn't figure out what his white-boy friend liked. Sometimes he played synthesizer music. Long and winding like a rubber band. Other times he played Hendrix, screaming guitars, something J.S. could appreciate. But the music he had on now sounded hillbilly. Good beat. Shrill, though.

Buddy's thoughts seemed focused on something out the passenger window. J.S. tried to see what it was. Nothing but hills and grass. No point in asking him what he was thinking. Buddy just got annoyed whenever anyone interrupted his space thoughts, or at least that's what Buddy called them, "Sailing out in space. That's all I'm doing, thinking out there." J.S. could

relate. He did that himself sometimes, just floated, nothing in particular in mind. But now his attention was on driving.

The power felt nasty in a nice sort of way. The metal vibrated his bones. The small steering wheel jerked against the palms of his hands, and he had to force it to the left or right when he wanted it to act right. But he thought he was doing okay, so he decided to pop the clutch when he pulled away from the stop sign. His body yanked back in the seat. “Whoa!”

Buddy laughed. “Man, you’d better learn how to drive better than that if you’re planning on driving me around.”

“Eat shit! I can drive this thing just fine.” But his mind chewed on the words “driving me around” like a dog on a bone. Was Buddy going to turn out like every other white asshole who thought black folks were only good for one thing—being a piss-ant servant?

J.S. shook his head. No way. Buddy never did or said anything like that. In fact, Buddy acted like skin color didn’t matter. The only things that concerned Buddy were his car, his friends, pussy, and enough cash to get blasted.

Not that J.S. minded the weed, and he surely liked the malt taste of that Little Kings ale his pal drank. But the glue? Buddy could keep it. The shit stank like scank.

The cracked concrete jarred the tires as he took the ramp leading onto Route 23, but J.S. forced the steering wheel to take it. The car hit the highway before punched the gas pedal. The wind whipped through his hair and felt hot against his arms. He worked through the gears as they made their way to a desolate strip of two-lane highway where the pavement stopped in the middle of nowhere.

Some nature freak people said they couldn’t finish the road, said the bog at the end of it was a nature preserve and nature preserves shouldn’t be ripped out just for putting in highways. J.S. didn’t know. He never went to the bog until the night he and Buddy took a couple girls out there for a make-out session. Buddy’s girl was all over him. The girl he was with seemed a little uptight, but he liked her. She had attitude. Yep, plain up attitude with dark eyes that dared him to go beyond touching her anywhere but around her shoulders and enough to lay a light kiss on her. Betty was her name. Betty Higgins. Part of him wanted to get his hands down those tight pink shorts, but the other part thought he could surely fall in love with

a girl like that, one who didn't let him. Later he did, too, but that was a long time ago, or rather ahead, and he wanted to stick to thinking about Rene.

Rene Agite. Her name was still Agite, although Matio was already like a father to her. So much shit fell inbetween J.S. knew he couldn't remember it all, not without a month worth of thinking. But he remembered the day he first saw her.

She was sitting at the end of that desolate strip of highway. He squinted through the windshield at the bright yellow flash of a car.

"Oh shit," Buddy said.

"What's up?"

"Pull over!" Buddy sat up in the seat and grabbed a hold of the dashboard with one hand and the door handle with the other.

"What?"

"Just pull over!"

"Okay, don't get your nuts in an uproar." J.S. maneuvered the car to the brim.

"Trade me places, bro," Buddy said, jumping from the car and slapping the hood on his way to the driver's side.

J.S. didn't argue. He just got out and switched places. Where's that shoulder harness? He had a feeling he was going to need it.

Buddy slammed the car in gear and sprang the clutch. "Remember what I said about Matio?"

"Yeah."

"A ticket's sitting at the end of this highway."

J.S. didn't understand what Buddy meant, but it didn't seem like it took even a second to sprint to the end of the highway. There, sitting at the end of the road, was another Deuce, just like the one they were driving, maybe a 1967 rather than a 1966, if he was any judge, which he wasn't. Jacked up. Chromed out. Canary yellow with hot pink swirls that ran down the sides and underlined the words *Sweet Baby* on the back.

But the car wasn't what dumbfounded J.S. It was the girl sitting behind the wheel. Not that it didn't make sense a girl would be driving a car with hot pink swirls. But a girl sitting out

in the middle of nowhere, acting as though she was waiting on somebody or nothing in a car that looked as though it could scream if it wanted? Now, that was freaking unbelievable.

When they pulled beside her, she didn't even look at them. She just kept staring across the steering wheel, her face smooth, as though she were laying along side a river with her fingers tangling in the current.

Buddy leaned his head out the window, folded his arms, and rested his chin on them. He stayed that way for a minute, watching, trying to get her attention, before he said, "Sweet Baby, huh? That mean you or the car?"

J.S. choked down a laugh. Stupid-ass white boy.

Rene shoved her long dark hair back so it fell over her shoulders like chocolate-brown silk. She didn't answer, but she turned. Her mirrored sunglasses reflected Buddy's face back at him. Her dark olive skin looked so smooth she could pose for a magazine. Her full, sexy lips made J.S. want to jump out of the car to plead with her—no, downright beg her to let him devour them.

"You interested in a challenge?" Buddy asked.

"Nah, I've already got enough challenge in my life."

Buddy shook his head. J.S. laughed. It wasn't that J.S. begrudged his pal's smooth line or his ability to make girls squirm in the seat of their pants, but at times, it got old.

"I'll bet," Buddy said.

Rene ran her sunglasses across Buddy's Deuce, reflecting the chrome back at them.

"Unless you're interested in running title for title."

J.S. could hear the feisty Latin rock sounds of Santana coming from her window. He could feel the warm fall breeze on his face as it mixed with the smell of dead cornfields.

Buddy said, "I never gamble on the woman I love."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right." Rene turned away. "I wouldn't want to take your play thing away from you."

Buddy laughed. It wasn't one of those full-blown, hee-haw, leg-slapping laughs Buddy was famous for when they were tying one on with the guys. It was more like the "you're cute and I wanna get up all over you" laugh.

"So what else you got in mind?" Buddy asked her.

Rene shrugged. "Can't think of anything you've got I want."

"Can't say you know what I got."

Rene turned back, lowered her sunglasses, and stared at both of them. She leaned forward to take a good long look, across the bridge of her nose. Her eyes were smoky gray. She shoved her glasses back into place. "Oh, I've got my ideas. And it isn't anything I'm interested in having."

J.S. laughed. Buddy smacked him.

"Hey!" J.S. shouted.

"That so?" Buddy asked her.

"Yep, that's so," Rene said.

Buddy tapped his hands on the steering wheel for a second. "How about if I agree to. . .let's say. . .wash, wax and clean out your car twice a week for. . .a month?"

Rene leaned forward and played with the dials on her eight-track. "And if you win? Not that it's gonna happen."

"Do you hear that?" Buddy asked J.S. "She thinks it ain't gonna happen."

Stupid-ass white boy, J.S. thought.

But Buddy turned back to Rene. "How about you agree to go out with me?"

Rene's nose wrinkled. "Go where?"

"Anywhere I wanna go."

"Well, I'm not allowed out of the county, I'm not allowed in bars, and I'm not allowed out after midnight."

Buddy shrugged. "No problem. How about if I pick you up at six?"

"If you win, you mean."

"Oh, I'll win, all right."

"It's your gas," she said. "Is your friend gonna flag?"

Before J.S. could say boo, shoo, or fiddly-doo, Buddy boosted him out of the car with a rag in his hands. Standing at the end of a highway in the middle of a cornfield wasn't his idea of a good time, but it looked like he didn't have much choice. Buddy and Rene revved their engines. He counted to three and threw the rag to the ground. Hard. They sprinted off in a cloud of rubber as he kicked at the pavement and then jumped around holding his toe like

some kind of circus act until he decided to hobble off the highway and see what was happening down the road. J.S. laughed. His pal lost. Stupid-ass white boy.

Chapter 6

Jake

Jake looked at his watch. 3:00 p.m., July 4th, a fucking holiday even. Oh well, at least he managed to get there on time. If Garth Agite requested a meeting, he needed to show up, and he needed to show up on time.

Jake stepped inside and closed the door behind him. Gar's office was the same as Gar's life. Nothing excessive. Nothing complicated. Pure, middle-class suburban right down to his Lincoln Towncar. Gar said it attracted less attention. Jake considered the amount of attention something more suitable to Gar's income might attract insignificant. During the last five years, since 1985, when Jake joined in with Gar, the business already produced more than its share of attention, at least as far as law enforcement was concerned. Jake had a feeling Gar lived a low-key life for other reasons. The exact reasons, he didn't understand.

The office included six gun cases filled with rifles and positioned three each, side-by-side, against two walls. Fishing poles hung from racks, along with several stuffed and mounted trophies. The most prominent piece of furniture was Gar's cherry desk, centered in front of a large bay window overlooking a row of pine trees along the west perimeter of the property.

Gar swiveled around. He was wearing his usual white shirt, sleeves unbuttoned and rolled to the elbows. His short muscular frame and balding head leaned to the side of the leather chair. "Well, did you get her?"

Jake reached inside his suit coat and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He took one out and tapped it on the front of the pack. Gar's questions were like psychiatric inkblots. Jake chose not to answer.

Gar rubbed the tip of his bulbous nose. "The girl with the brown hair and big tits. Did you fuck her?"

Now, it was worth answering. "Yeah, she wants to meet you."

"But you haven't gotten enough to pay out on the promise yet, eh?"

Jake laughed. Gar knew him too well. All the nightclubs. All the opposing opinions on women they expressed over the years in drunken fits of salaciousness. All of it came to a boil. Gar knew his hidden doorways better than most people.

“Maybe after the next pass.” Jake figured the young woman was worth a third shot, especially since her disposition changed on the second.

“Just let me know.” Gar rotated his chair toward the dark oak-paneled wall to the left. “I’m always up for a favor, especially if she has decent tits.” His black eyes met Jake’s. “What does she want, anyway?”

“The usual.”

Gar laughed, “Yeah, they all wanna be a star.”

Lightning bugs flashed through the window. The flashes seemed to shift in momentum. Faster. Faster. Slow. Slow. Slow. Faster. Faster. Jake felt the humor leaving his face as he thought about how wrong it was, why Gar would want to screw someone who looked like his daughter, and how he was willing to help. No matter how much he hated Rene, he didn’t hate her as much as Gar. Hatred that strong didn’t seem right.

Gar spun his chair back. “You know we lost Rancey, don’t you?”

No, he didn’t, but at least he understood the point of the meeting. “Where?”

“Tucson.” Gar’s voice held the well-thought-through lack of tone he was known for. “He made five exchanges.” Standing, he tugged at the waistband of his pants. “I’m going upstairs to get some fresh coffee. You want anything?”

Jake shook his head no.

Gar stepped out of the room while Jake considered the implications of what Gar told him. They had a problem. Four years of Rancey following him around, showing up at restaurants, at the movies, and at his apartment in mid-town, something even the new “rollouts” didn’t do, not if they wanted to stick around. But Rancey was easy enough to distract. Nothing more than a persistent fly buzzing around a pile of sugar.

Jake thought it amusing how little it mattered which side people were on when it came to skirting the edge of legality. Fraud was illegal. Fencing stolen goods was illegal. Dealing drugs was illegal. Most of the business was illegal, and anything that wasn’t wholly illegal, laundered money. But none of the bits and pieces, by themselves, were enough to attract the FBI, unless things got big. Then, regardless of affiliation, or which side of the law people were on, everyone stuck their hands out. The FBI wasn’t an exception.

After Phil Matio died, Jake sat back with interest and watched Gar take over Phil's business. One piece at a time without creating even a penny-toss of a ripple in Gar's empire.

Gar put dollars in everyone's pockets, and Phil's people responded to Gar like a rich uncle. But Gar didn't stop there. He took things a step further. He treated them like family. Settled their quarrels and advised them on their investments. No one came away from the takeover worse than beforehand.

What puzzled Jake was why Gar took such an interest in him. He wasn't the oldest in the pack. Gar had at least a dozen guys around longer. And at times, Jake didn't even think Gar considered him the brightest or the most trustworthy.

Gar's reasoning for keeping him on was obvious. It was the same reason Phil took him on initially. He was young, full of testosterone, and unafraid of even God himself when it came to business.

But that, in itself, didn't explain Gar's decision to move him upward at such a fast rate. One year he was in charge of a group of new "rollouts," teaching them the ins and outs of breaking and entering, and how to avoid getting popped. The next year he was second in command. Not that he didn't embrace the change. He did, but none of it stopped him from wondering about the reasoning, especially in light of his past association with Gar's daughter.

He could still remember the last house he, Rene, and J.S. did together. What a screw up. They were standing in the grass beside a two-story, combination stone and wood sided house in Cleveland Heights—she in front of the window, and him on the left, with J.S. serving as a lookout.

He remembered thinking how Rene's face looked stretched from the rubber band holding her hair back. She motioned him forward, and he did as he'd done a hundred times in the past. He grabbed her and hoisted her upward while she reached through the window and pulled on the latch. Her hand gripped the sill, another lift, and a forward roll put her in. All he had to do was wait a full minute before following. J.S. was supposed to bring the van around ten minutes later.

That's the way it should've gone. Too bad it didn't.

Two loud bangs followed two blue and yellow flashes. Rene dove headfirst out of the window, hit the ground in an acrobatic roll, and sprinted off into the darkness. He didn't need an invitation to follow. J.S. was the one who lagged behind.

Idiot. He should've ran. Jake shook his head. He stubbed his cigarette out hard in the ashtray.

"Women," Gar said when he came back and flopped in his seat. "Can't live with them. Can't live without them."

It took Jake a second to realize Gar was talking about Irene. "You've been with Irene a long time."

Gar shrugged. "She puts up with me."

She puts up with a lot, Jake thought. "It ain't so bad."

"Well, what are you going to do about it?"

"Do about what?"

"Rancey," Gar said. "How do you intend to take care of him?"

"Only two possibilities. Either get him back on the payroll or take him out."

"He's not going back on the payroll."

Jake didn't say anything. He didn't agree with the decision. It was easier to pay Rancey off and forget about it. Cops, politicians, FBI agents. It didn't matter. They were easier to manage on the payroll than off. One wrong move, and the payout records could fall into their laps.

"Greedy, little bastard," Gar said. "He thinks he can extort us. Up the price. Up the price. That's all he's about. Everything has a limit."

Jake shrugged. "So we take him out."

Gar tilted his chair back and thought a moment. "No, there's another option."

"I'm listening."

"Talk to my daughter. She's the one Rancey's after."

Jake felt his chest tighten. Facing Rene wasn't what he expected, wasn't even sure he wanted.

Chapter 7

Rene

Rene looked at her watch. 8:00 p.m. J.S. was late. Not much, but late. October 7th. It was his birthday, his 35th, and his first since he left prison. He told her to meet him at 7:30 p.m. to celebrate, and she didn't have the heart to say no. Birthdays meant too much to J.S.

The pool cue felt foreign in her hands as she twirled it and bounced the rubber bottom on the wooden floor of the tavern. The smell of smoldering cigarette butts and whiskey irritated her nose, but the music was pleasant. In fact, the tavern always reminded her of a just-between-friends party. Everyone was so pleasant and casual. Disagreements rarely cropped up.

Having J.S. around for the last couple of months was better than she'd imagined. They spent their evenings laughing over the past, and their days—any days she could take off from the shop—trout fishing, hiking the trails, and swimming in the crystal-clear waters of Whitefish Lake. She smiled at the thought of J.S. and his first chipmunk. Chasing it around and around a tree, running in circles until he fell down into the pine needles, laughing so hard he choked.

But now, early fall was upon them. The leaves on the mountains were turning brown, leaving only the towering evergreens behind. The deer were in rutting season. And in general, the residents of Whitefish were winding down until the ski season started and another group of tourists surged the sidewalks, looking for a piece of that old western flare they came to Montana to discover.

Rene wondered how J.S. would take his first Montana winter. She remembered her first. She spent so much time digging out the Deuce, she decided to store it at Ramsey's Rent-a-Garage the next winter. No point in trying to drive. That is, unless she wanted to strap a snowplow to the front end.

Maybe J.S.'s new job would occupy him when the snow hit. She wish she hadn't handled things the way she had when he'd first told her about it. "What does the guy expect you to do? Why does he want to hire an ex-con? Does he even know you're an ex-con?" She'd asked too many pessimistic questions.

She wanted to feel happy about it, about anything J.S. did. He got his GED and took a few college courses in prison. He even learned how to cook, part of his new job duties. But for some reason, the job made her suspicious. J.S. was on parole, and he didn't have what you could call any job experience outside of B&E. Why some Hollywood type wanted to hire him as a live-in attendant just didn't make sense.

Rene supposed she shouldn't feel so cynical. She didn't know the fellow. Fan magazines weren't her taste in reading. She hated television, and the last time she went to the movies was sometime in, what? 1982 or so to see *E.T.* Who could ignore that little fellow? Oh, and the *Cannery Row* remake. How could she forget? Her fondness for John Steinbeck suckered her right into that one.

"Your turn," her pool partner said, tearing her away from her thoughts.

Rene smiled. Tourists. She had to appreciate them since she made her bread and butter from them, but no matter how hard she tried, she still couldn't help thinking they were all the same. Different boots. Different western slide ties. Different colored or patterned shirts. But all overgrown boys and girls, pretending to be cowboys once they hit Montana.

She walked around the table, tapping her fingers on her cue stick and looking over the layout. What compliment could she make? "You got all but two balls in."

"Yeah," the wannabe cowboy said, as he swaggered back and forth at the end of the table. "I play more than my share of eight-ball back home."

"That so?"

"Yeah, got me a little pool hall down the street where I like to go to now and again."

"Ah, that would explain."

"Won a couple of tournaments, too."

Bull. "Really?"

"Nothing big, but I play enough to make me quick on the stick."

Yeah, right. "So, you wanna make a little wager then?"

"Wager?" He laughed, his teeth showed crooked beneath his mustache.

Rene shrugged. "Sure, if you want."

"Well, what d'ya have in mind there, little darlin'?"

She stuck her leg out behind her to stretch her body. She hated the word “darlin’.” Seemed like all the cowpokes used it.

He walked around the table toward her.

Rene skirted away, circling in the opposite direction and feigning concentration on the position of the balls across the table. “Well, I have seven balls on the table.”

“Sure do, darlin’.”

Gag. Rene stopped at the far end of the table and squinted. She could see Pete, the bartender, frowning at her from across the room through his dark blonde beard and mustache. Pete didn’t like her wagering with the tourists, but the guy in front of her needed an awakening about exactly what a woman could do.

Screw you, Pete. “But, you know,” she said to the cowboy. “I believe I can sink the rest of my balls and the eight without giving up the table.” Hook.

“Think so?”

“Well, maybe, I dunno.” Line. Gonna take it, cowboy?

“Well, darlin’, here’s a hundred says you can’t.”

Snag. Rene tried her best to look hesitant while the cowpoke reached for his wallet and pulled out a hundred dollar bill. She checked her pockets and felt around for a minute. Two crumpled fifties appeared in her hand.

“I’ll hold the money if you want,” a man’s voice came from behind her.

Rene turned, and her tongue caught in her throat. The man sitting at the table looked almost identical to Buddy Hanes. A little older than the last time she saw Buddy. A little younger than if Buddy were still alive. But the same straw-blond hair, the same squared jaw line, the same liquid-blue eyes. Definitely the same eyes, and the same lean, muscular build. Yes, no doubt about it. The guy could’ve passed for Buddy, if Buddy had lived to his early thirties.

The cowboy handed his hundred to the man. Rene walked slowly around the table, tracing her finger along the rails. Her heart tomahawked against her rib cage, and her legs didn’t want to cooperate. She wished she hadn’t made the bet. She hadn’t expected this type of distraction. How could she? Sure, there are people out in the world who look alike or at least similar, but she hadn’t expected to meet one who looked like Buddy.

Rene laid her two fifties next to the mystery man's glass of scotch. Neat. Just the way a man ought to like it. "Don't take off now."

He laughed.

Crap. He even laughed like Buddy. Deep, genuine, the kind of laugh that made people want to laugh right along with him.

"Don't worry," the mystery man told her. "If you beat him, I'm next."

"Next to be beaten?"

He laughed again. His eyes sparkled with amusement as they rubbed her all over. Not a sensual kind of rub, but a rub that made her feel naked all the same and stayed with her as she walked over to the table and bent to measure her shot. Her hand quivered on the pool stick. She straightened up and shook it.

"Nervous?" the cowboy asked.

"A little."

The game should've been an easy hundred. Pool. Cars. Swimming. Those were the things she did best.

The first two balls made their pockets. The third fell off a cross-bank, but just barely, and left her blocked behind the eight ball.

"Tough break," the cowboy said.

The mystery man clicked his tongue.

Rene pulled her hair back, letting it fall straight down her back to brush against the top of her jeans. She couldn't afford to lose the hundred she had riding on the table. She needed to focus.

Country music crooned from the jukebox. The clink of glasses mixed with talking and laughter rang out from behind her as she walked around the table, examining the layout.

Okay, just do it. She stooped to the table, stretched her leg out behind her, concentrated, and landed the chalked tip on exactly the right spot. The cue ball made a half-circle around the eight ball and put the nine in the corner pocket.

Yes!

"Holy shit," the wannabe cowboy said.

The mystery man holding the money gave a low whistle.

The shot put her right in line for her fifth with the sixth and seventh following up to the rear. The eight ball fell with a gratifying thud.

“I do believe you’ve been hustled there, cowboy,” the mystery man said.

“Ap-par-ent-ly.”

Rene pinched her head to her shoulder. “You wanna go again?”

“No thanks.”

The cowboy’s pool cue hit the rack on the wall, and he shoved his hands in his pockets as he swaggered off toward the bar for another J.D. and coke. She hoped he didn’t complain to Pete.

“So you wanna play?” Rene asked the mystery man.

He looked at her a moment, and she returned his stare without blinking.

“Yeah, hell, why not?” He stood and took another drink before tucking in his shirt and moving to the end of the table to grab the rack off the hook. “So what’s the wager this time?”

“Umm.” Rene calculated what she thought he was worth. High dollar boots. Designer jeans. No cowboy shirt. No hat. Must be a local. She hadn’t seen him before, but perhaps he was from a neighboring town.

She watched him shake the balls forward and spin the rack away from them in a clean, two index finger swoop. Okay, so he knows how to rack.

“Care to make it something a little more interesting than money?” he asked.

She frowned.

He grinned. “I guess not.”

Rene wished he would’ve pushed it a little more. She assumed the something more interesting was sex, and even though one-night stands weren’t her style and wagering for sex was definitely against her principles, sex with him might be something worth remembering, or maybe something she never forgot—that is, if he was anything like Buddy in the sack.

The mystery man came up behind her. She could smell the sweet odor of scotch on his breath and the light scent of his cologne.

He asked, “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?”

“Nope.” Rene stepped away from him and moved to the head of the table. The past had her tongue. Not the cat. And she wasn’t going to let him distract her from her game again. “So, how about five hun—”

Right then, the door to the tavern slapped against the wall, and J.S. came in with two women pushing around him. The women, two blondes in tight jeans with tufts of hair sticking straight up from their foreheads, screamed.

J.S. jumped aside. Rene instinctively moved her pool cue in front of her. Both women pushed past her and grabbed hold of her would-be pool partner’s arms.

Rene stepped back and her body bumped against someone behind her. She turned to beg her apologies, but her mouth froze.

“Well, well, well,” Jake Batella said, dragging the words out. His face was blank. “Now what do you suppose we have here?”

J.S. pushed his way between the pool table and the women. “That you, Jake? Well, I’ll be. Who would’ve expected to see you here?”

Jake glanced at J.S. His expression remained the same. Rene couldn’t believe that in less than one hour, she managed to run into someone who looked like her first lover and now stood face-to-face with her second. Well, not her second—there was one brief encounter inbetween—but the second who mattered.

“Screw you,” Jake said to J.S. “And you,” he said, turning back to her, “I would’ve thought you knew better.”

Knew better about what? Rene looked toward the mystery man, her would-be pool partner. The women were still bunched around him, bouncing up and down, rubbing their pert, bra-less breasts against him. He was taking pieces of paper from their hands and scrawling something across them. She cursed herself for letting him distract her. If she’d been paying the least bit of attention, she would’ve noticed Jake before he confronted her.

“Well, I—” she started.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.” J.S. had his arms down to his sides, his fists clenched and his legs in a fighting stance. He took a step forward. “But I know you need to use a little more respect if you’re gonna talk about it.”

“And exactly what do you think you’re gonna do about it?” Jake’s eyes were hard with the same look of malice Rene had seen a hundred times in the past.

J.S. didn’t need trouble, and she sure didn’t want her past splashed all over the Whitefish News, small though it might be. She looked at her pool cue. If she shoved it between them at an angle, it might break any serious damage so they could clear out before the police arrived.

But just as J.S. took another step forward, and she readied her pool cue for the block, the mystery man came up and threw his arms around both her and J.S., pulling them inward toward his body. He smiled at Jake and then cocked his head slightly toward J.S.

“Well, are the two of you ready to head off?” he asked.

Rene didn’t know what to say. It took her a minute to realize the man was Keith North, J.S.’s new employer. She looked at the floor. She felt stupid. The mystery man—no, she couldn’t call him that any more. North didn’t give her much chance to think about it. He grasped her arm firmly and steered her toward the door.

His lips brushed her ear. “You know, you owe me big time for this.”

Rene felt her eyes widen, and her cheeks flush. Part of her wanted to glance back, to see the look on Jake’s face. The other part knew she couldn’t since things were already at a full code red level.

Mostly, it made her think about how she and Jake used to be lovers and how all of it changed and how she didn’t want to go back, no matter how good Jake still looked. They were like cement and water. Both innocent when separate, but hard when they came together.

Jake thought he could control her. His body turned her hot, but his actions turned her cold.

“Man, oh man,” J.S. shouted as soon as they hit the door of the tavern and the cold night air. He smacked his fist into his other hand.

“Who was that?” North asked

“Batella,” J.S. spat the name out like a stale piece of gum irritating his mouth. “You know, the guy I told you about.”

North nodded. Rene looked up from the wooden sidewalk. How much had J.S. told North about their past? His story, her story, or enough to create trouble for both of them?

“I think we need to get out of here,” North said.

Rene looked down. Somehow her car keys made their way from her pocket into her hands.

“You want me to drive?” J.S. asked her.

“No, I think I’m gonna—”

“Oh, no you’re not.” North snatched the car keys from her and tossed them to J.S.

“You’re not getting away with dumping your pal on his birthday.”

Rene’s mouth opened, but she couldn’t seem to say anything. She stared after him as he walked toward his Ford Bronco.

J.S. nudged her elbow. “Come on. You don’t wanna to be around when Batella comes out here, do you?”

No, she didn’t. At least, she didn’t think so. Crap. She didn’t know. She shoved her hands into her pockets and frowned as she walked toward the Deuce. The night air tasted metallic as she swallowed big gulps.

The moment they climbed inside, J.S. rattled off the same question in Rene’s head.

“What the hell is Batella doing here, anyway?”

“I dunno,” but she had an idea—Rancey.

“I figured he’d show his ugly ass head sometime, but tonight? He has some nerve popping around here tonight.”

“I don’t think he remembered it was your birthday.”

“Oh, the muthafucker remembered all right. When have you ever known him to not know exactly what’s up?”

J.S. was right. The three of them worked together for two years before J.S. got arrested. She and J.S. both knew Jake well enough to know he knew people—knew what they thought, what they wanted, how to work them.

Rene played with the glove box button while J.S. ranted on about what a lousy S.O.B. Jake was. Not always, she thought.

She could still see Jake’s soft brown eyes and sharp nose. His solid, muscular body that came to a perfect three inches above her five foot, five inch height. His big hands and patient fingers. His hot, crushing mouth.

She wanted to tell J.S. to go back. She wanted to tell Jake why she left. How she couldn’t stay with him, with Phil, with everything their lives—her life—included then. But she didn’t.

She stayed quiet until J.S. stopped ranting. She loved J.S. Not in a sexual way. More like a brother. His round face and full-lipped grin always made her smile. No matter how sad or mad she was, he could wipe it away with just a grin and a small nudge.

The trees blocked her view of the fields running behind them. Whitefish was full of wildflowers and feed grain. The rolling terrain made perfect cattle and horse country, the two other means of making a living outside of tourism. Whitefish Lake was to her left, and even in the darkness, she could make out rocky shoreline and an occasional sand beach, mostly artificial, created by one of the residents. Whitefish, especially surrounding the lakefront area, was a trap of luxury homes, what part-time residents liked to call ranches, but didn't resemble ranches in other parts of Montana, or even Whitefish.

Rene looked at the long dirt driveway when J.S. turned off East Lakeshore Drive. She wondered how well she could handle being around North. It wasn't his celebrity status that bothered her. She could care less. It was the other part—how much he looked like Buddy.

“Screw you,” she said.

J.S. blinked. “Say what?”

“You heard me. Screw you!”

A smile broke out across his face. She wanted to yank him out of the seat by his scrawny neck and smack him.

“Well, if you insist.” J.S. said, still grinning.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I suppose I know why you're upset, but what could I have said about it?”

The car stopped. Rene thought a minute. What could he have said? “Hey, I'm working for this guy, a movie star, who looks exactly like your first lover, my pal, who died in a car wreck and tore our lives apart.” No, that wouldn't have worked. She wouldn't have believed him.

She leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes. Her mind bled across the past to the night Buddy slid across the tile floor in Casana's. The act was an almost comic gesture. He looked up from the floor at her. “So, you wanna marry me?”

Her girlfriends giggled. Everyone looked up from their pizza, until they realized it was Buddy.

“No, thanks.” She pulled her long dark hair back over her shoulders, even though she knew the habit was one her father wanted her to break.

Buddy rubbed his chin and turned to her friend, Polly. “Do you believe that?”

Polly was sitting across from Rene, twirling her light blonde hair around her index finger. “Uh-huh.”

“Don’t you get the picture?” Catherine Matio said. “She whipped your ass all over the highway, you sniffed around for over a month washing and waxing her car, and she still doesn’t want to go out with you.”

That was Catherine. Quiet when it came to her own predicaments, but outspoken when it came to Rene and what she thought was in Rene’s best interests.

Polly said, “She ain’t into marriage, Buddy.”

“Oh yeah?” Buddy stopped and looked at Rene a moment before turning back to Polly. “Okay, how about asking her if she’d go on a honeymoon with me then?”

The girls broke into another fit of giggles, all but Catherine, who said, “No,” and rolled her eyes.

Rene tapped her fingers on the table. “Maybe.”

The girls went silent. Buddy’s mouth sprang open as if he swallowed a fly in midair, but it didn’t take him long to recover. He mouthed the word “maybe” to J.S. who was sitting at the front table, drinking a coke. Jumping from the floor, he shouted, “Did you hear that? She said maybe!”

The whole room laughed. Even the plump woman who owned the pizza house put her hands on her stomach and belted out a laugh.

Buddy dropped to his knees again. “You realize I’m gonna make you keep that promise, don’t you?”

Rene shrugged. It wasn’t like “maybe” was much of a promise.

“Yeah, bro, and pigs might fly someday, if you’re lucky,” J.S. said.

Rene hadn’t known her answer would screw up the rest of her life.

Chapter 8

Jake

Jake stood on the sidewalk in front of the tavern and lit a cigarette. He hadn't expected to run into J.S. and Keith North when he confronted Rene. But Rene's reaction was still precisely what he wanted. She needed to feel nervous, damned nervous, if he was going to pry her away from Rancey.

It had taken him a month to hand off his responsibilities to his underlings, who preferred to call themselves bosses, even though they were nothing close. Individually, none of them had what it took to handle his job. But by splitting up the various components among them and keeping in touch by telephone, the business would manage while he took care of Rancey and Rene.

His first step was to track Rancey's travel route. For his own conscience, he needed to make certain Rancey was, in fact, plying Rene as Gar thought. Rancey was good. He knew how to throw mud in his tracks. Not enough to make himself invisible, but enough to make his moves well hidden.

Jake uncovered them, though. In a little over a month, he determined Rancey was checking on Rene inbetween other cases. So he hit the Glacier International Airport in Kalispell and settled in. He arranged for rental car changeovers, appropriate clothing, and a cabin. He wanted to make sure Rene didn't notice him until he was ready to approach her. Not that she had reason to think someone was following her. But, even if she had, he was the best equipped to handle the job.

Following and losing people were among his many talents. He seldom handed it off to a lesser associate when it involved something as tricky as Gar's daughter mixed up with an agent like Rancey. Variation, distance, and patience summed up his surveillance approach. Never wear or drive the same thing twice, never get too close, and never act like you're in a hurry. It hadn't failed him yet.

At first, Jake convinced himself he needed to assess the situation. Follow Rene. Figure out what she was up to. But after a while, knew he was watching her because he wanted to. He liked knowing where she lived, where she shopped, where she bought gasoline, and even

where she ordered her Chinese takeout. He'd forgotten how attractive she was. Older, but still good-looking. Her breasts, the same large mounds he once found exciting. No, not once. He still found them exciting, along with her full lips, and glossy dark hair that hung to her hips. He liked the way she pulled her sunglasses up to pin back her hair, how she cocked her head slightly when she listened, and how she bit her bottom lip when she was nervous.

Not that she was a nervous person. Far from it. Her attitude was a blend of humor and sarcasm, and very few things ruffled her. She lived life as if the whole thing, each event, was nothing more than a game of Tiddlywinks. Snap one plastic disk against another, and ping. It either hit the mark, came close, or missed altogether. She might try to master whatever she decided to do, but the outcome wasn't overly important. Experiencing it and enjoying it was enough.

The only things he could remember her being one hundred percent serious about were drag racing, pool, and thieving. He'd only seen a few people beat her behind the wheel or a pool stick, and at thieving, her planning was immaculate. She cased the houses the minute Phil handed the addresses off to them, and she mapped out the best approach and every minute detail. They knew what they were facing, right down to the last shrub conceivably blocking their view, or the gravel they might slip on, before they set foot on the property. Everything ran perfect. They always got the goods, and no one ever got caught. Until J.S.

Oh well, so life went. J.S. wound up prison. She left. He stayed. But none of it prevented him from missing her little idiosyncrasies, the things that made her unique from other women. And he enjoyed the week and a half of watching them until Rancey showed up.

Jake was sitting in his car, reading the Missoula Times, when it happened. Rene darted from the bank across the street to the café, and Rancey pulled up in his Ford a few minutes later. Jake popped his sunglasses on, pulled his Stetson down, and followed them, sliding into the booth with his back to Rene.

"It's time," Rancey said.

The waitress plodded over to Jake's table. "What can I get for you, honey?"

"Coffee, black with sugar."

"Time for what?" Rene asked.

The greasy smell of the restaurant made Jake rub his nose. He brushed at the red and white, checkered oilcloth.

Rancey coughed—a choking cough. “Time for what? Don’t give me that, you know what. You promised to go back to Ohio and take Garth down if we got J.S. out of prison.”

“I told you I’d go back to Ohio when I thought there was something I could do to put an end to the operation.”

“Well, you’d better accomplish something soon, or. . .”

“Or what?”

“Or we’ll toss J.S. back in prison and handle things our own way, that’s what.”

Jake couldn’t see either one of them, but he could imagine Rene biting her bottom lip and pulling her hair back. He wasn’t sure why Rancey wanted Rene to take Gar on. Sure, Gar had his illegitimate businesses, but shortly after Gar sucked up Phil’s operations, he also expanded their legitimate enterprises to the point they really weren’t a major FBI issue any more.

First, Gar picked up a couple of small casinos in Vegas and Atlantic City. Then, he poured the profits into a larger casino and a couple of legalized Nevada cathouses. After that, he dumped the smaller casinos and purchased two additional casinos, both in Nevada, both large. His last move was to up the efforts in filmmaking by taking two of his small porn studios, renaming them, and turning them into legitimate production companies. Then, he went after a studio. Not just any studio, either. He went after a big one—Unity—buying up stock, trying to gain the majority to put himself in control.

It took only three or four years for Gar to reduce the number of trouble spots and keep only the most profitable illegal setups. Initially, Jake wondered about the wisdom of Gar’s move on Hollywood, but later, he understood. Filmmaking produced thousands of ways to launder money. Several paper bombs a year, and the illegal part of the business appeared one hundred percent legal, at least in the eyes of the IRS, even though Gar never put money into a true bomb. His films always made money.

The beauty of the setup, and what didn’t make much sense on Rancey’s part, was putting an end to Gar’s business would put an end to FBI money. Gar said he didn’t want to pay out to Rancey, but with a little persuasion and a lower price tag, Gar would. Then business could go on as usual. Jake could assure that much.

“You want anything else, sugar?” the waitress asked.

“No, nothing. I just need some time to myself.”

She turned on her heels and left. Jake realized he’d missed pieces of Rene and Rancey’s conversation in the process.

“Don’t act like you didn’t know there’d be consequences if you didn’t make good on your promise,” Rancey said. “That’s the way it works. You tell us you’re going to do something, and you do it.”

“I’ll do what I promised, but not what you’re telling me to do now. Either way, I’m going to need time. This isn’t something I can do overnight. I have to—”

“You have to get back in the action.”

Jake slid his way further into the booth. The coil spring lump in the seat bothered him. Why Rancey wanted Rene to run B&E’s again didn’t make sense. That’s all she ever did, and that part of the business was nearly gone now. It would prove little, if anything, and certainly wouldn’t prove enough against Gar to make it worthwhile.

Rene said, “You’re wanting me to go back and commit illegal acts?”

“I’m wanting you to do whatever you have to.”

Rene didn’t answer. Jake wondered what she was thinking. Rene hated her father, although he never quite understood why. The only thing he remembered was her telling him that her father kicked her out for dating Buddy Hanes, but hell, the guy had been dead fifteen years now, and he couldn’t see her carrying out a vendetta for it, not for something that old.

“Look,” Rancey said. “You need to go home, you need to make amends with your father, and you need to get back in the game if you’re going to give us enough to take your father and Batella down.”

Jake winced at the mention of his own name and pulled the cowboy hat over the bridge of his nose.

“I didn’t tell you I was going back into the *game*. I haven’t been in the *game* for years, and probably wouldn’t even know how to play at the level they’re playing now, if things are as big as you say they are. What I told you was—”

“What the hell did you think I meant, when I told you we needed to go back and put an end to your father’s operations?”

“Well, what the hell did you think I meant when I told you I’d do it?”

Rancey didn’t answer. Jake wished he could see the look on Rancey’s face. Rancey was nuts if he thought Gar was going to fold up shop just because his daughter came home. He was nuts if he even thought Gar would trust his daughter enough to let her back into the business with no questions asked. Gar might let her run a little shop somewhere, but that was about it.

“Look, I’m outta here,” Rene said. “Do what you want, but either I’m doing it my way, or not at all. And if you don’t like it, you can shove it.”

“A month.”

“A year.”

“That isn’t good enough.”

“Tough.” Rene rushed past the booth Jake was sitting in and out the door.

Jake threw a five on the table, and slid from the booth—making sure his back was to Rancey. He could tell the meeting upset Rene. She kicked at the dirt beside the café. He probably should’ve talked to her then. Or now, as he took another hit off his cigarette and stared out into the darkness in front of the tavern, he realized he should’ve at least waited until they were alone. Talking with her in the tavern while anyone could drop into the conversation hadn’t been a well-thought out approach, so was not knowing about J.S.

J.S. shouldn’t have been in the picture for at least another fifteen years. Even that was too soon, in Jake’s opinion. But at least he knew the deal Rancey cut. Rancey got J.S. out of prison. It figured, Jake thought. Rene had always let J.S. have his way. He could still remember how Rene dismissed the comment J.S. made years ago when they were sitting inside Ben’s Diner waiting on their usual burger and fries after finishing a job.

J.S. had tapped his fork on Rene’s water glass and said, “What do you wanna go and hook up with baby boy for?”

Jake stood up and planted his palms flat on the table. “Baby boy, my ass. Who the hell do you think you are?”

Rene waved her hand as if she were shooing away a fly. “Because I’m tired of the good-old-boy routine.”

Jake never understood what she meant. Oh, he understood what a “good-old-boy routine” was, but what Rene meant by him not being part of it puzzled him. He did everything they did,

and he couldn't see how he was any different from every other guy she'd worked with or known. Even now, ten years later, he still couldn't see it, and he'd thought about it a lot over the two weeks he'd been following her. Had she thought he was somehow different? Had she thought he was somehow better than the rest?

He needed to forget about it. He had a job to do, and he was glad he stepped outside the tavern to think. The tavern was too noisy. Country music blaring. People shouting and laughing. Boots stomping on wood. Outside the noise seemed distant. Smothered by the mountains around him. Coming in contact with Rene and J.S. took more out of him than it should've. He needed to regroup.

Looking down, he realized how out-of-place his black dress shoes looked against the rough, wooden planks of the sidewalk. He was made for the city. Not hanging out in the middle of nowhere.

Jake took the last hit off his cigarette and finger flicked the butt to the dirt edge of the street. It lay there, glowing like a small Chinese lantern. He wondered how Rene and J.S. managed to hook up with someone like North. Not knowing about J.S. was one mistake, but not knowing about North was a second. He saw Rene talking with North, but he figured she was just sizing him up for an easy take. Her actually knowing North or being at the tavern with him hadn't entered his mind.

Doubtful North would create much of a problem, though. Hell, if it came down to it, he'd just call Gar and let Gar take care of it. No big deal. North would disappear the second he saw his career flapping in the wind over something as insignificant as a roll in the hay with the daughter of the major Unity Studio stockholder. Not to mention the owner of a couple production companies. But why bother? Whatever Rene and North had going would more than likely die a natural Hollywood death. North would screw her and leave her. Or maybe Rene would be the one who'd do the screwing and leaving. It wasn't like she hadn't done it before.

Jake looked at the sky. It was getting dark. The sun had already smoldered its way behind the mountains, throwing shadows across the sidewalk. He heard the click of boots against wood. "Hey," a woman said.

He smiled and nodded. She was handsome, although he wouldn't use that word to describe most women. Shoulder length, auburn curly hair. Round face, with a pug nose. She wasn't the type of woman he went for, but she was still handsome.

She stepped a few feet closer and pushed a curl away from her face. "I hope you don't take this the wrong way, but you don't look like you belong here."

Jake laughed. He couldn't imagine anyone looking as though they belonged there. Whitefish seemed to him to be made up of two types: tourists and transients. She didn't look like a tourist, so he figured her for a transient, just marking time until she lit out for better things.

"You're right about that," he said.

Her auburn eyes moved down his body. He smiled, even though he didn't show it on the outside. He was used to women checking him out. His gym-hardened body and the black Franco Tassi suit he'd chosen for the occasion looked good.

"My name's Virginia. What's yours?"

"Jake."

"Nice to meet you, Jake. So where're you from?"

"Ohio."

"Small world, huh? My boss is from Ohio."

"You work at T-Shirts and Stuff?"

"Yeah." Her curls bobbed up and down with her head. "How'd you know?"

"I know your boss." He lingered over his words, considering how he could describe his association with Rene without lying, although he didn't know why lying should concern him, since he was generally known for his ability to lie on demand if the situation called for it.

"She's an old business partner of mine."

"Hmm."

"Does that bother you?"

"No, I just can't imagine Rene being in business with someone of your, I dunno, style. After all, she does sell t-shirts for a living."

Jake laughed. He considered Virginia for a moment. Maybe she could give him a piece of insight as to how he could handle Rene, what made her tick, what she was looking for.

“So you wanna get a drink?” Jake asked.

Virginia shoved her hands in her pockets and stared off at the mountains.

Jake touched her elbow. “Hey, what could it hurt?”

She smiled. “Probably nothing.”

Or maybe everything, Jake thought.

Chapter 9

J.S. and Keith

J.S. looked at the mug of draft Keith put on tap for him earlier. He thought about how good the beer tasted. How good the leather sofa felt. How good Rene and Keith looked together. He couldn't figure out what Jake was up to, but he sure hoped Baby Boy—could he still call him Baby Boy? Probably not. Jake was all grown up now, but he was still a punk. A short, brown-haired, brown-eyed, white-bread punk who could rot in hell. Jake was an asshole, and he sure hoped Jake wasn't planning to stay.

"So, J.S., what do you think?" Keith asked. "Should I take it or not?"

"Take what?" J.S. asked. He needed to quit letting his mind wander.

"This little wager your friend is offering."

J.S. laughed. "Depends on whether you wanna win or not."

"Hey," Rene said, "since when have you known me to run a bum wager?"

"Never, but since I know you, and I know you've never lost, and I know Keith's my boss, and I know I don't wanna get fired—"

"That isn't true. I've lost, and you know it."

"Once, but you threw it."

"Threw it? I've never thrown a bet in my life."

Keith laughed. "Okay, okay, it doesn't matter. Either way, I'm in."

Rene smiled at Keith and then stuck her tongue out at J.S.

J.S. smiled. He figured Rene and Keith seemed okay with one another, but did she, or would she, have the same connection with Keith she had with Buddy? He didn't mean to think about it because it led him to nothing but grief. But even though Rene liked to bicker with him, he still loved her.

He couldn't help the way his mind drifted. Prison did that to people. Forced their minds into living in the past. Now, he couldn't seem to shake it. His mind went wherever it wanted to go whenever it wanted, and his thoughts kept playing across the night Buddy first talked Rene into riding with them. How she climbed into the Deuce and scooted onto the pillow Buddy

kept on the console. How Buddy shifted into gear and ran his hand up her leg. How she hauled off and slapped him. Hard, too, right across the face.

Buddy had rubbed his jaw and grinned. J.S. had laughed so hard his sides hurt. But by the time they made their way out to the country, J.S. remembered his laughter turning to a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach. The fields with their dead stalks sticking out stared at him. The tree branches hung out over the road like fingers. Rene's body pressed against his. It felt warm and soft. She smelled like lime. He wondered whether it was soap or cologne.

Suddenly, her body jerked, and she swung around toward a farmhouse off the road. It was the same old, boarded-up farmhouse where Buddy went to drink and listen to that sad ass synthesizer music.

"Wait! Stop!" Rene said.

"No." Buddy's eyes stayed fixed on the road.

They slid past.

Rene turned back around and stared at the road. It was so dark it looked like they were streaking across the back of a skunk, one big white line running up the center of black with nothing around it.

Rene said, "It was you, wasn't it?"

J.S. remembered feeling his own breath rise and fall in his chest, and how he wanted the music to stop, just long enough to hear what Rene had to say.

"You were the little boy who walked in on that, weren't you." She said it more than asking.

Buddy kept driving.

Rene asked, "You know it had nothing to do with you, right? She didn't do it because of you. She did it because. . .well, because she was unhappy, but she wasn't unhappy with you. It wasn't your fault."

Right then, that very night on the road running away from that boarded up farmhouse, J.S. figured out Rene had something inside her. Something that let her see into the past. He didn't know the moment it happened. He didn't know anything about Buddy's mother or how she blew her brains out until years later, but once he found out, once one of Buddy's old pals

said something about it, his mind snapped back to Rene and that night, and he knew, without a doubt, that Rene saw it in her head.

Keith smacked him on the shoulder, jarring him back to the present. “So what do you think? Can she take me or what?”

J.S. felt his forehead pinch. Take him at what?

“Yeah, right,” Rene said. “Like you’re gonna take me in my own car.”

J.S. smiled. Same old Rene. “I think you oughta listen to her, boss. She’s had the Deuce for as long as I’ve known her, and I can tell you, she ain’t no light weight in it.”

Keith didn’t listen, not that J.S. expected him to. He hadn’t known Keith long, but he still felt like he knew him, like Buddy all over again. Same attitude. Different life.

Keith pulled him off the sofa, and Rene grabbed hold of his arm on the way out the door. The thought of Keith driving *Sweet Baby* made him smile. Even when he first saw the car, he thought the name fit Rene like a tight pair of shorts.

But seeing Keith behind the wheel made him think of déjà vu and how he never understood the meaning of the word until he met Keith and then pulled Rene onto the same beach, forcing her, and him along with her, to swim through the past. Maybe through another person, but enough like the past in other ways to make him understand something. He just didn’t know what that something was supposed be, or at least not yet.

At times, he felt as though he got the past and the present mixed up, but he still wondered if that’s why he wound up in Montana, to take care of something. Any direction it went, he was sure he would figure it out when the time came.

J.S. looked out the back window of the Deuce and let his mind relax. The ranch fields surrounded them and filled him up with darkness. It was 1:00 a.m., and they were headed for the roundie-round at the back of Keith’s acreage. They used the track for racing anything on wheels, or hooves, since Keith liked to race horses. The ranch stretched out across one hundred and forty-one acres with a thousand feet of Whitefish Lake frontage across the road and a fifty stall cattle barn with another ten stalls set aside for horses.

A shop building sat behind the cattle barn, and an apartment building as well, with two six-room and four three-room units for the ranch hands when they were there. The number depended on the season since the spring and the fall required more for hands breeding and

roundup than the summer or winter months for grazing and feeding. There was an outdoor gazebo and boat dock built on the lake. The track was behind the cattle barn, a ten-minute drive by dirt road from the house, maybe fifteen in the Deuce since it wasn't made for rough terrain, and Keith was moving slow.

Keith shifted the gears of the Deuce forcefully. A little tight. He tested the clutch again. Very tight.

He wondered how a pair like J.S. and Rene managed to come together. Sure, he'd just spent the last few hours listening to their stories about drag racing and good friend follies. It was rather amusing, although it made him realize there was more to their friendship than a seventeen-plus year history.

J.S. had a criminal past. He was still on parole. Keith knew that. He also knew Rene was a deciding factor in getting J.S. out of prison, although he wasn't exactly sure how, and J.S. seemed as though he didn't know, either. The prison part didn't bother him. J.S. was honest about it from day one. And he felt honesty was more important than anything else, especially at this point in his life.

"I know you'd be taking a risk," J.S. told him at the interview. "But I swear you won't regret it. I'm a hard worker, and I'm loyal. I always have been, and I always will be, so I can guarantee I'll be the same with you."

Keith hired him on the spot, and so far, he didn't regret the decision. J.S. knew how to cook, handle the mundane tasks at the ranch, take care of any small errands that needed taken care of, and listen and keep his mouth shut. Keith considered the last more valuable than J.S. realized.

To Keith, the ranch represented an escape and a reminder. He bought it as a vacation spot for him and his now bitch of an ex-fiancée, Andrea Kandet. They used it as a get away from Tinsel Town to do a little skiing.

They made their share of appearances, but only if they were up to dealing with fans, and even then, they limited their outings to the Kalispell casinos or Brent's Tavern. He preferred the tavern because he liked the competition on the pool tables, and Andrea liked the dance floor, even though he didn't like dancing since all of his fans thought he should dance with them once he started. But, as a whole, his followers were less ardent than Andrea's. His

dressed-down appearance allowed him to blend into a crowd, whereas, Andrea reeked of celebrity. She sucked up the attention like a vacuum, even if she didn't like women paying attention to him, not beyond asking for an autograph or a quick snapshot.

Andrea never showed her jealousy in public. There, she was nothing but quick smiles and waves for the cameras. But when they were alone? She screeched like a bat awakened by daylight. Not only about every woman he talked with on the given day in question, but a rehash of every woman he talked with over the last year and a half. What was he supposed to do? Stop paying attention to women because he put a ring on her finger?

Screw her. There wasn't any point in wallowing in what happened now. It was over. Six months over. Plus, he had a birthday party to finish and a woman sitting beside him, with her legs crossed and a bored look on her face.

Keith looked at Rene and tapped the steering wheel. "You should see this sweet little Porsche 911 I have back in L.A."

"Porsche?" Rene's nose wrinkled. "Why do you want a piece of foreign junk when you could have good old Detroit metal?"

"Detroit metal?" Keith laughed. "Too clunky, too old, too slow."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, really."

"So how many seconds does your precious Porsche take to make the quarter mile?"

"7.0 the last I ran her."

"Not bad, but I bet I can do better."

"Better? In this heavy chunk of metal?"

Rene laughed and tugged at her shoulder harness. "Put your money where your mouth is, if you wanna see it happen."

Keith grumbled, but took his hand away from the wheel and pulled out his wallet. Is there anything this woman wouldn't bet on? Probably not, although he had to admit her cockiness amused him.

"Okay, I'll tell you what, Ms. I-Can-Do-Everything-Better, let's up that wager we just cut."

"To what?"

“My thousand to yours.”

She rolled her eyes. “I wish, but I left my spare thousand in my other pants pocket.”

The car bounced against a dip in the dirt road. It wasn’t meant for the same rough terrain as horses, dirt bikes, farm trucks, and three wheelers. It raced highways and flat, two-lane streets in Cleveland the last time J.S. saw it in action. And no matter what Rene said, she threw that race with Buddy. Hell, she didn’t even hit fourth gear. She wasn’t fooling him.

J.S. snorted a little as he settled back in the seat behind Rene and watched the rolling grassland spread out around them like a quiet hole in space with only sounds echoing outward from the car. He listened to Keith and Rene joke about Rene’s expertise. Keith seemed to be holding his own, but he knew Rene could turn it around and shoot it back in a second if she wanted.

“So what do you propose?” Keith asked.

“I dunno,” Rene said. “I haven’t had much time to think about it.”

“Well, how about . . . my thousand to your honor?”

“My honor?” Rene laughed. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know.” Keith grinned. “Sex.”

Oh, shit, J.S. thought. Stupid-ass white boy didn’t just say that, did he?

“Sex isn’t wagered.” Rene sounded miffed. “It’s earned.”

J.S. could see the wheels spinning in Keith’s brain. He was sure Keith hadn’t counted on a woman who wouldn’t ante up that easy on a roll in the sack. Rene wasn’t one of them. And J.S. knew the wager had now turned from friendly to serious as far as Rene was concerned.

“So what else would you suggest?” Keith asked.

“How about your thousand to my services as a chauffeur every evening for a month?”

J.S. perked up at the idea. He wouldn’t mind Rene taking over the chauffeuring part of his job for a month, even though the ante was running high. He could use the time for studying that accounting course he was thinking about taking. It seemed like something he could use if he was going to help with the money end of ranching.

“Oh, hell, I already have a chauffeur,” Keith said.

J.S. yanked at the strap on the side panel. He didn’t like being called a chauffeur, even if it was part of his job.

Rene glanced back at him, smiled and winked before she said, “Well, I suppose I don’t need to prove it then. If a chauffeur isn’t what you need, then I can do without the thousand.”

“Okay, okay,” Keith said. “A chauffeur it is, then. My thousand against a month of your evening chauffeur services if you manage the quarter in 6.9 or less.”

“Deal.” Rene stuck her hand out.

J.S. grinned.

Rene tapped her finger on the side of her forehead. “Just remember that’s on top of the original bet.”

“The original bet?” J.S. realized he missed out on something again. Drifting in and out of the past was like being dropped into the middle of a game of checkers and not knowing which color he was playing.

“Three dates versus three days of t-shirt shuffling,” Rene said.

“Well, I suppose that couldn’t hurt.” J.S. figured Rene could handle herself on a few dates, and Keith could stand for some t-shirt shuffling.

The car came to a stop, and J.S. got out. The air smelled like evergreen and its coldness bit at his skin. He threw the two massive metal bars that worked the floodlights for the track. The switches went down with a clunk. The track was nice hard-packed dirt with enough floodlights to light up a Giants game.

“Whoa,” Rene said, shielding her eyes from the light. “What are you trying to do? Scare off the wildlife? You know, you really shouldn’t have bothered. I could’ve handled this in the dark.”

Keith laughed. “No, you don’t. I’m not biting on any more wagers.”

J.S. pushed Rene forward.

“Hey,” she said.

“I’m not working the flag.” J.S. would be hanged if he was going to stand on the sidelines again. No siree. He was riding, and neither Keith nor Rene were going to convince him otherwise.

J.S. fussed with his seat belt. He pulled it snug across his hips and leaned forward to make sure Keith and Rene had their shoulder harnesses on. No mishaps were going to pop up while he was around. Not if it was within his power to prevent.

Keith pointed to a red marker pole about fifty feet down the track. "See that pole?"

Rene nodded.

"Hit the stopwatch when we pass it."

"No problem," Rene said.

Keith cracked his knuckles. Rene settled back in the seat and crossed her legs, holding the stopwatch out in front of her. Keith revved the engine to a high pitch and popped the clutch. *Sweet Baby* lurched forward in its usual display of power.

Nice take off, J.S. thought, as he felt Keith shift hard.

J.S. leaned forward to watch the needle of the speedometer bury at the top end a three-quarter of the way to the finish. Rene clicked the stopwatch when they hit the quarter mile marker. *Sweet Baby* slid across the track in a fit of dust. She then crossed her legs the other direction and looked at her cuticles. Keith frowned, and J.S. nearly laughed aloud at the look on Keith's face.

"Well?" Keith asked.

Rene flipped her hand over and looked at the stopwatch. "Not bad. Not bad at all. You managed 7.6 seconds in this heavy old chunk of metal."

"Not that great, either. I could've done better in the Porsche. This old clunker is hard to get off the ground."

"Hmm." Rene tossed the stopwatch into his lap. "Well, let's see how I do in this old clunker before you insult Detroit any further, shall we?"

Oh shit, J.S. thought. He hoped he wasn't going to lose his job.

J.S. knew Rene would play her little game. She and Buddy had been two of a kind when it came to a wager. In the beginning, J.S. thought it was a tease. Oh, they were both serious about it, and he was just as serious about living it right along with them. But he knew there was something sexual about their wagers. Sexual dominance, he figured. There wasn't anything sexual about this, though. No, siree. Rene was pissed.

Stupid-ass white boy, J.S. thought when he thought about Keith wanted to wager for. Too much money for his own good. He probably should've warned Keith, though. Or at least told Keith a little more about her. Maybe then Keith would've realized she wasn't the same kind of fluff Keith was used to having around when it came to women.

J.S. watched as Rene strapped herself in, and drove the car back to the starting point, positioning it for the take off before she revved the engine to a high pitch and nodded in satisfaction. She adjusted the mirror and the gear shift before popping the clutch. J.S. felt his body heave backwards and his hands go to the edge of the seat. The car stood on its rear tires and wheel stands, like a lion racing forward on its hind feet, before coming down with a slam, traveling a few feet, and hitting the start marker.

J.S. placed one hand on the roll bar above his head. He felt his face flatten against the speed while he watched Rene drive like he'd always known her to drive. Wind, clutch, slam. Nearly in the same second.

He hadn't seen her do it for a long time, but the car responded to her just like he remembered, and they roared past the quarter mile marker almost as soon as they started. J.S. wanted to whoop when Rene used her old grand finale, spinning the car 180 degrees in a bat turn.

"Well?" she asked.

Keith looked at the stopwatch. "6.8 seconds. Un-be-liev-able."

"Not bad for a clunker, huh?"

J.S. didn't want to laugh because he wasn't sure how his boss would take it, but he couldn't help it. The laughter poured from his mouth like water.

"All right, all right," Keith said. "You were right. She whipped my ass."

J.S. rubbed his ribs. "I hate to say it. But knowing you're gonna be doing three days of t-shirt shuffling is probably the best birthday present anybody's ever given me."

Chapter 10

Keith and Rene

Keith stood in the kitchen fixing his usual hangover cure of tomato juice, lemon, and a splash of Tabasco. A Virgin Mary. He didn't like vodka anyway. Scotch was his drink of choice, and J&B in particular.

The kitchen smelled like Windex, and everything glittered. Probably the cleanup J.S. gave it yesterday, but it was annoying against the harsh sunlight pouring across the counter to the stainless steel appliances. At least the dark oak cabinets buffered the light. Keith put his head in his hands and leaned on the ceramic countertop. He stared at the brown swirls in the tile. They made his stomach woozy. No more beer. He did better with scotch.

Footsteps echoed hard beside him as J.S. came into the room, filled a glass of water, and drank it. "You ready to go?"

Keith stood up and coughed. "Yeah, sure, a day of t-shirt shuffling is something I really want to rush off to."

J.S. laughed, his brown eyes probing. Keith recognized the look. J.S. was measuring his mood, and he knew why. His moods had been volatile ever since the big breakup. No, that wasn't exactly true. His moods turned volatile before the breakup. They'd been that way ever since Andrea accused him of sleeping with Cheri Henley, even though there wasn't any truth to it.

Cheri was a dancer at The Haven, and his friend, Mike Stratton, had the hots for her. Plus, he and Cheri had other mutual friends, so he didn't consider it out-of-line when he ran into her at the Outrigger and decided to hang out with her for a while to see if any of their mutual friends made an appearance.

They talked about this and that. They played a couple games of pool and danced one disco number together. It didn't amount to anything until Frank Starz, the "King of Sleaze," the one who stood out as the worst among the paparazzi, showed up.

If he'd known Starz was present, he would've told Cheri and left. No big deal. He did it before when he saw Starz, but this time Starz took the precaution of wearing a long, stringy

haired wig complete with black plastic-frame glasses. He played the plastered-ass drunk role to the hilt, sopping up several JD and Cokes and making lewd comments.

None of it bothered Cheri. She was used to handling drunks and swatted Starz aside like a gnat until he grabbed her and shoved his hand up her shirt. She started kicking and pushing. Starz wouldn't let go. Keith grabbed a hold of him, spun him around, and landed a blow right to the eye.

After the cameras came out, Keith realized Starz set him up. The whole mess wound up in the evening news, and Andrea rode him about it for three months before she dropped her goodbye press release.

Screw her.

Keith sat his glass on the counter. Montana was a long way from L.A., and he needed to let it go.

"T-shirt shuffling will do you some good," J.S. said.

Keith gave J.S. a deliberate hard look. "Since when is t-shirt shuffling good?"

J.S. slapped him on the back before flinging his arm around Keith's shoulders. "When it gets you out in the world, bro. When it gets you out in the world."

World my ass, Keith thought. Being born to two Hollywood movie stars was enough *world* for anyone. Sure, it had its advantages. Prep schools. Tutors. Most material things he wanted. His father even set him up in a couple apartments while he was living in New York City, trying to eke out a living as a model. But after he left New York City to go into acting, he refused any more support from his parents. They didn't like his choice. He didn't want to listen. So, he moved to Los Angeles without their blessing.

The decision meant working drudge jobs and living in shit-holes for a couple years while he took any bit part he could grab, but it paid off. Rodney Durham saw him in *Holy Heaven* and cast him as the lead in *Dark Nights*. The film was a rather eccentric teenage vampire flick. He did his best in it and looked good in the cuts. But he never expected it to turn into a cult classic run several times a year, especially at Halloween. The results gave his career a boost and put him in five major box office films.

None of it assured his success, though. After the split with Andrea, the parts dropped off, and his acting career sunk to a dubious level.

“Come on.” J.S. grabbed hold of his arm. “You’re gonna be late.”

Keith shrugged. So what? he thought, but he followed J.S. to the Bronco and strapped himself in. It seemed like only seconds before he walked through the door of T-Shirts and Stuff and winced at the cowbell clanking against the wooden doorframe. He looked around. The place smelled of incense, or maybe perfume. He couldn’t tell which. The sound of his footsteps across the wooden floor made his head creak as much as the tongue-in-groove boards. A young woman behind the counter looked up. She blinked, and her mouth gaped.

“Is Rene around?”

“N-no,” the girl stammered. “She doesn’t come in until around noon.”

“Figures.” Keith had no doubt Rene told him to show up around ten so she could sleep off her hangover while he made explanations to the counter help.

“You need me to stick around?” J.S. asked.

Keith considered it a moment. He could leave J.S. to do the work, but that wouldn’t be sporting, and he didn’t want Rene to accuse him of renegeing on a bet. “No, I think I can manage.”

“Okay, I’ll be back around six,” J.S. said.

“No need.” J.S. opened his mouth as though he wanted to say something, but Keith beat him to it. “I’ll call you if I need a ride.”

J.S. shrugged, but left with another cowbell clank.

Keith turned to face the young woman with the befuddled look on her face and extended his hand. “Hi, I’m Keith North.”

“Yes.” She gave him a firm handshake. “I know who you are. I’m just not sure why you’re here.”

“It’s a long story.”

He listened as she introduced herself while Virginia Dietz, formerly of Nevada, but now a permanent resident of Whitefish. She then propped her head on her hand and listened as he explained the bet and how he was now obliged to work three days at T-Shirts and Stuff in exchange for his loss.

“Nothing new,” she said.

“Rene’s done this before?”

Virginia smiled. "Sure. Plenty of times. Although you're the first celebrity we've gotten."

Keith wondered exactly how many times, but he soon forgot as Virginia began explaining the ins and outs of tourist ware. He got along okay under her instruction. He even managed to sell about a dozen t-shirts, several hats, and four pairs of boots before Rene stepped through the door and tossed what looked like an empty bank bag on the counter.

"I see you made it," Rene said, but didn't stop walking. She headed straight for the back of the store.

"Did you have any doubt?"

She laughed. "A little." She then disappeared into what looked like an office. The cowbell clanged against the doorframe again.

"Keith North!" a gaggle of women shouted.

Oh, shit. "In the flesh," Keith said with a smile.

Virginia pulled away from the counter when the women rushed forward. Keith talked with the five women, all in their mid-to-late-fifties, and listened as they explained their vacation itinerary. They were visiting from Kansas, taking in the sights, and planned to visit Glacier National Park, if they could handle the drive along the steep mountain roads.

"Well, you're going to need a few sweatshirts and maybe some boots, then." Keith liked pushing boots, even though Virginia told him earlier the best mark up was on t-shirts and sweats.

The women followed him to the boot display and listened as he explained the various benefits of leather and heel shape. Boots were something he understood.

"Would you like for me to help you try those on?" he asked.

"Sure," the women clamored in unison.

Keith schmoozed out his newly found sales technique and wondered why Rene was so casual about him. Most women liked him. Hell, most of them fell all over him. The ones in front of him now were giggling like schoolgirls at the touch of his fingers. Not that he enjoyed touching their feet. It seemed to encourage them to try on more boots than necessary just to retain his attention. But they each opted to take a pair and swore they'd watch all of his movies.

He stood up and led the women to the front counter. Rene stepped out of her office and watched the women leave with packages stacked high in their arms before she cocked her head and smiled at him. She was wearing a tight, lime green t-shirt with a wolf on it that said *Wild Life in Montana* and jeans that showed her belly.

Keith stared at her smugly. He wanted her to think he was mad at her for making him pay out on such a wager, but he couldn't pull it off. Her cocky attitude was too likeable in a challenging way.

"You know, North," she said. "You might make one heck of a salesman if you ever decide to give up the movie business."

"No, thanks, I think I'd rather stick to acting, if you don't mind."

"I thought you might say something like that."

The cowbell clanked again. Keith looked up to see a man in a suit and tie step through the door with a briefcase hanging from his arm. Rene frowned and retreated to her office. The man followed, closing the door behind him.

A boyfriend? Keith wondered. No, a boyfriend wouldn't make her frown unless he was an ex.

"What do you think?" A girl, maybe nineteen, with short dark hair cropped like a boy held up a bright pink tee with an eagle and the words *Flying High in Montana* written on it in puffed white synthetic.

"Nice," he said. "It brings out your complexion. Would you like to try it on?"

"Oh, yes, please."

Keith led the girl to the dressing room, a large closet, situated at the back of the store. Two more men came in, and Virginia walked over to help them, but one man with a large, protruding mole on his face waved her away.

"Don't go anywhere," the girl said from behind the dressing room door.

"Never," Keith told her.

The girl giggled. The men sifted through a rack of shirts at the front of the store, glancing at him every third shirt or so. They didn't seem like they were interested in buying. In fact, they looked out-of-place in their Tallia suits and what appeared to be New & Linwood silk shirts.

Keith heard Rene's voice escalate from behind the closed door. Two seconds later, the door slapped the wall, and Rene shouted, "Get out!"

The man yanked his briefcase from the floor. "I'll leave, but you'd better remember what I told you." The man tugged on the sleeve of his suit jacket as he headed for the exit.

Both men at the front of the store looked away. One pulled a western shirt from the rack and turned his back. The other walked over to the hat display. The man leaving Rene's office slammed the front door with such force Keith thought the cowbell was going to shatter the glass. One of the other two men glanced outside and touched the elbow of the other. They both left.

"Think it fits?" the girl from the dressing room asked.

Keith turned to look at her. "Beautiful."

She smiled. "Okay, I'll take it. . .oh, and this one, too." She handed him another, bright yellow t-shirt with a picture of the mountains and the word *Montana* in the corner.

After she changed, Keith took the time to lead her to the cash register, talk with her, and sign his name to her sales receipt.

"My friends are never going to believe this," she said.

Keith smiled. "Sure they will."

The girl left. Keith wanted to go back to Rene's office and ask who the men were and what they wanted, but he figured it wasn't any of his business. Rene was obviously in some type of trouble, gambling perhaps. Montana was full of casinos, and he'd seen more than his share of people hooked on the slots or the tables. But he didn't have much time to think about it before people began flowing in and out like ants, picking up parcel loads of merchandise and hauling them off.

Virginia worked the cash register, and Keith pushed whatever tourist gear he thought he could sell. The wooden floors of the store creaked against the soft shuffle of tennis shoes and hard thump of boots. The sun dropped behind the mountains. The fluorescent lights kicked on.

Rene could hear people talking in the changing rooms beside her office. She sat down. She got up. She paced around her desk until she picked up a stapler and threw it against the wall. It fell to the floor and staples popped out. She wanted to shout.

Five minutes later, she had all of the staples picked up and pitched into the trashcan beside her desk. No sooner than she was done, she started thinking about Rancey again, and she threw a ledger at the file cabinet. It fluttered to the floor in a blur of lines and numbers. She was so mad she couldn't stand it.

Rancey wanted—no, ordered her to go back to Ohio. Get involved with her father. Go back into crime. Two months, or he'd put J.S. back in prison. She couldn't believe he would, or threaten her with, such a thing.

Rene sat down at her desk again. "Think," she told herself aloud. "There has to be some way to stall Rancey and handle this."

She'd come too far to go back. She wouldn't—no, she couldn't go back. No matter how much of a bastard she thought her father was, or how much she'd like to see him rot in jail for the rest of his natural born days, she wasn't going back to Ohio to join him in his illicit business dealings just to take him down. Rancey could go to hell if that's what he wanted. It wasn't what she promised him.

And what about Jake? What was he doing in Whitefish? Okay, so Jake hooked up with her father after Phil died. If her father was as big as Rancey said, then it made sense Jake would do that, if he wanted to stay in the game, which he apparently did.

But up so high? Rene couldn't imagine what might make her father—no, wait a minute—there were at least two things that might make her father give Jake such a boost. One, he owed Jake a favor. Jake did something for him that rated advancement. Problem elimination? Strong-arming? She couldn't say. But she knew Phil used that type of advancement. That, and money.

Okay, so there were three possibilities. Jake could be the big moneymaker. Although even big moneymakers didn't move to the top in less than five years, at least they hadn't with Phil.

So that only left one other possible reason. Her father wanted to use Jake against her. That's the only reason her father would've sent Jake. That, and Rancey. Unless. . .no, doubtful Jake just wanted to talk with her. If he did, he wouldn't have waited ten years to do it. He would've called. He would've written. He would've come to Montana. He would've done any number of things before now.

Either way, she needed to talk with him. If Jake had one iota of feelings about her from the past, then perhaps she could convince him to back off, or maybe even help her. Well, help wasn't likely, but delay? Maybe.

Rene sighed and picked up the ledger. She stood at the small one-way mirror she used when Virginia pressed the alarm. Not that they had much cause to hit the switch and set off the flashing light in the office. An occasional shoplifter, or a tourist who couldn't take "no" for an answer. Whitefish was tame, even with the influx of so many vacationers.

Arms folded across her chest, Rene watched Keith move among the racks of clothing. She couldn't get over how much he looked like Buddy. Slightly different. Quicker stride. He crossed his legs when he sat down. Buddy had never crossed his legs.

Rene frowned. She wondered about the pictures, the mental flashes that popped into her head whenever Buddy's life teetered on the edge. Buddy threw them out like high voltage. They were there every time she thought about him or came near him. She always felt like she needed to reach out and prevent something. But it wasn't like she could name the exact time and place he was going to off himself. Yes, she'd saved him from a few mishaps—some major, some minor—but those were the easy part. She still couldn't prevent the inevitable. Not without his cooperation. Some people were bent on leading self-destructive lives.

Knowing that didn't help, though. The flashes, images, visions, whatever she got still frustrated her. What was the point in them if she couldn't do anything about what she saw?

Well, at least she managed to convince the mother of that young girl about her husband. Rene could still see the woman slamming out of the shop, leaving her husband there with his mouth open and a Stetson in his hand.

He knew. Their eyes met one time, and she was certain he knew she could see what he'd done, that he'd molested his step-daughter. Something deep, dark passed between them. The pictures. Bright, vivid pictures. But it was more than that. It was like looking into his soul, his very reasons.

Rene shivered. She wondered how all of it turned out. Did the mother take him back? Probably. Most likely. She hoped not.

Of course, she hadn't left much up to chance. She called the Milwaukee Children's Services a couple weeks later and asked them to follow up on it. But even that, even knowing

she may have stopped one of the thousands of shitty acts she'd seen over the years, didn't make her feel better. She wanted to get rid of the flashes. They ate up her life.

About the most she could do was surround herself with people who didn't put off pictures—not the horrid ones that happened in the past, not the preventative ones about the future. She cloaked herself with people she didn't feel the need to protect. Maybe if she'd done that years ago, she wouldn't have gotten involved with Buddy. Or would she?

Rene shook her head. Maybe. If such a thing as destiny existed, then yes, she still would've. He was part of her life. A friend. A patient and knowledgeable lover. Even though he didn't have a clue about the word fidelity.

Rene tapped her fingers on her arm. Had J.S. told Keith? Hard to say, but her heart told her the resemblance was why J.S. was so fond of working for Keith. J.S. and Buddy were brothers. Not by blood, but by choice, by condition, by need.

Would it turn out the same way? Maybe. Keith and J.S. seemed to rely on one another. But the rest? Doubtful.

At least she didn't see anything when she looked at Keith. No pictures. No flashes. Just a sense of sadness, or maybe boredom.

Keith seemed content working in the shop, though. Happy even. She couldn't complain about having him around. Even a brief glance told her business was higher than usual. No doubt because word had gotten out that Keith was selling tourist ware.

The men were a little more macho than the women about talking with him. But even they seemed to enjoy the brief contact. Rene could appreciate their reaction. Keith was a charmer. He was more self-confident and casual than flashy, but he was still a charmer.

Rene smiled as she watched Keith demonstrate the correct method for peaking the brim on a Stetson. He certainly understood tourist ware, especially male tourist ware. His charisma with the women sold the rest.

She stepped out of her office and signaled Virginia to flip the closed sign. Virginia locked the door and stood by the counter, waiting for the remaining customers to clear out.

Virginia looked frazzled. Her auburn curls were ruffled from running her fingers through them. Her plaid cotton shirt was wrinkled and half tucked. Rene knew Virginia had taken up a

lot of slack. Rancey and the aftermath had sucked up too much of her time and caused her to neglect the duties in her shop. Not a good thing on such a busy day.

Rene took Virginia's place behind the register. "You can go now. I think Keith and I can handle the sales and ring out the rest of these folks. I'm sorry I didn't help out more today. Things were. . .I was just having a bad day."

Virginia smiled. "That's okay. I never thought we could sell so many t-shirts in one day, though. Oh, and we're almost out of sweatshirts. I never thought we'd run out of sweatshirts."

Rene smiled. "It's been a winner."

"Must have been one heck of a bet you laid on him."

"Yep." Rene laughed.

Virginia never said what she did in her personal life outside of a few tidbits about Nevada and her family. Rene didn't ask. She figured it wasn't any of her business, especially since she didn't like talking about her own private life. But tonight, a black SUV pulled up and parked out front, and by the contours, Rene assumed it was a man.

Virginia pulled her jacket on and slung her purse over her shoulder. Rene watched as the passenger door of the SUV popped open, and Virginia hopped inside.

Good for Virginia, Rene thought, as she watched the SUV pull away from the curb.

A woman's voice intruded. "I think that's it."

Rene turned to face a plump woman, in her fifties, maybe early sixties, with a dimple on her right cheek and an obvious coal black dye-job. "Did you find everything you needed?"

"Oh, yes, more than enough." The woman opened her wallet before she leaned across the counter. "But, I have to admit, if I had my way, I'd take your cute little salesman home with me."

Rene laughed. "I think a lot of women would."

The woman cocked her head at Keith, who was now watching them with a broad smile. "Well, honey," the woman said with a wink. "He's here for a reason, and I have a feeling it isn't to sell boots. So maybe you should consider taking him home."

Rene felt heat seep to her cheeks. "No, no, I'm. . .well, I'm not available."

The woman smiled and shrugged. "Too bad." She glanced back at Keith and sighed before she settled her bill, waved at Keith, and left in a satisfied fluff.

Rene occupied herself ringing out the balance of the customers. She stacked and folded fifteen t-shirts, ten sweatshirts, and six pairs of pants. She boxed eight pairs of moccasins, four cowboy hats, and ten pairs of boots. How in the world could Keith sell so many high-dollar boots?

Customers hit the counter as fast as she could ring up the totals. But at last, they were all out the door, and she locked up, waving to the last two, as they wandered down the wooden sidewalk with boxes in hand.

Keith came over and took a seat behind the counter. Rene busied herself punching the final buttons on the cash register while Keith watched.

Her mouth gaped at the totals. Good Lord! She knew they were doing well. She saw Virginia make several trips back to the safe, but she never thought it would amount to \$16,543.78.

“Well, how’d we do?” Keith asked.

“Good.” Pretty darned good. The amount was quadruple what they pulled in on a top-dollar day.

“Only good?” He stood and looked over her shoulder. “We should have done better than that. I worked my ass off.”

She glanced behind him. “Nope, it’s still there.”

He grinned. “Nice of you to notice.”

“Well, it’s good enough to have you back tomorrow if that’s what you mean.”

“What? My ass or the sales?”

“Both.”

He laughed.

Rene started filling in her bank deposits. She could hear the clock ticking on the wall. The hairs on her neck stood at attention against the feel of Keith’s eyes. “Did you drive, or is J.S. coming after you?”

“Neither. I thought you could at least give me a ride home after my staggering display of salesmanship.”

Her forehead knotted. Keep it light. She focused again on the cash totals and bank deposit slips. "I dunno. You know how that employer-employee stuff goes. Taking you home could wind up getting me involved in one of those harassment lawsuits or something."

"No, you'd have to actually be paying me for something like that to happen."

"You want money?"

Keith laughed. "I doubt you could afford me."

Rene returned his laugh. "Probably not."

Her eyes stayed steady with his. He was funny. She liked him. She had a weakness for confident men with a good sense of humor. At least she had in the past. But too many bad outcomes told her she needed to avoid them.

Men poured in and out of Whitefish like flour running through a sieve. She didn't get involved with them. She didn't want to get involved with anyone. She liked her life the way it was, or at least the way it was before Rancey showed up. Now, her life was too complicated.

"So?" he asked.

"So what?"

"Should I give J.S. a call and interrupt him from making dinner, or are you giving me a lift?"

"Well. . ." She thought about it for a minute. "If you wanna wait until I make my bank drop, then I suppose I can swing you by the ranch."

"Sounds like a plan. Just let me call J.S. and tell him we're on our way. He gets a little testy if I bring a guest home unannounced."

She started to say no, but didn't have a chance before Keith strode toward her office and the out line. How in the world did he know they had an answer only line at the front counter? Virginia must have told him.

Oh well, she could straighten it out later, or at least she could've if Keith hadn't talked non-stop from the store to the bank and then to the ranch. Every time she opened her mouth, he filled the air with information and questions. He told her about the ranch and his plans for turning it into a horse ranch, as well as a cattle ranch, and how J.S. was helping him with the details. He asked her about the Deuce, and how she came to own it, and where she learned to drive like she did. He even managed to squeeze in a few questions about Ohio, and what it was

like where she and J.S. used to live, what the weather was like, how she liked living on Lake Erie, and if she liked living in small city.

Small city? With almost a half a million people, she never considered Cleveland a small city. Sure, it wasn't Los Angeles, but it was a lot bigger than Whitefish or Missoula or any place she'd ever been.

"So, are you going to come in?" Keith asked her once they arrived.

J.S. rushed out the front door and across the driveway. "Come on, come on! The food is getting cold."

Before she could say anything, J.S. had the car door open and his hand on her arm. She wanted to beg out of the invitation. She was tired and needed to go to her supplier in Kalispell early the next morning. But she didn't want J.S. to feel like she was avoiding him just because he lived with Keith, so the next thing she knew, she found herself seated with pepper stir-fry in front of her, feeling uncomfortable with J.S. flitting around the table in full serving mode. Not that J.S. didn't cook when he stayed with her. He did, and she always found herself amazed at what a great cook he turned out to be. But he never acted like a servant. She came home and filled her own plate before they sat down at the table together. Sometimes she read bills. Other times they talked about what they did throughout the day.

"Why don't you sit down and join us?" she asked.

"Yeah, J.S.," Keith said. "We have plenty of food on the table, more than we need."

J.S. checked their drink levels and disappeared long enough to bring out some more rice before he sat down, spooned up a big helping, and turned to her. "How'd Keith do at the store?"

"I killed 'em," Keith said.

Rene wiped her mouth on her napkin. "He could stand a little more training in display arrangement and cashiering, but other than that, he did fine."

Keith's lips tightened at the corner.

She and J.S. both laughed.

Keith shrugged. "Okay, fine, just wait until our next wager and you won't be laughing so hard."

Rene picked up her glass and took a drink. “So you think things will turn out better next time?”

“No doubt in my mind.”

“Oh shit,” J.S. mumbled.

Rene snorted “Pretty confident of yourself, aren’t you?”

“Yes, always,” Keith said.

They talked a little more about the ranch and how J.S. thought he might be able to tighten the bills. Keith didn’t seem concerned, but listened with an attentive look on his face. Rene felt her chest swell with pride. Her friend—no, her brother—was doing fine. She knew J.S. was smart, and he was proving it. She felt sure J.S. would never return to prison, and she made the right choice, even if Rancey was a pain. Rancey was just a bug, and she could figure out how to deal with him. She would also figure out how to deal with Jake. Neither of them were going to ruin her life. Especially not when it came to J.S.

“So how about that game of billiards you were proposing the other night?” Keith asked.

“Billiards?” Rene tapped her fork on her plate for a second. “Oh, you mean pool.”

“Hey, it’s my room and my table, so I can call it anything I like.”

Rene laughed. “True enough, but I’m not sure I’m up for it tonight.”

“Oh, I see,” Keith said, the word “see” hanging on his tongue.

“You see what?”

“It’s okay when you win, but if I want a second chance, it’s nothing doing.”

“He’s got a point,” J.S. said.

“What is this?” Rene asked. “Tag team wrestling?”

Keith choked on his scotch. J.S. slapped his knee and laughed. But they both managed to spit out the word, “Yes.”

“Okay, okay,” Rene said. “I can see I’m outnumbered, but I’ve gotta tell you that I’m only up to playing one.”

“One should do it,” Keith said.

J.S. said, “Sounds fair to me.”

It didn't take them long to clear the dishes and make their way to the billiard room. J.S. settled in behind the bar, poured Keith a neat scotch, and handed her another Virgin Mary on the rocks. The cues were straight, and the table level, but Rene wished she had her Balabushka.

The Balabushka was one of the few things left Phil had given her. It brought her luck. Probably because it was her sweet sixteen birthday present. She smiled at the thought of her and Catherine going to Riley's, the local pool hall, when she first got the stick. Wade Fielding, a family friend, and also a notorious pool shark, showed them a few shots. Both she and Catherine learned fast, made a lot of money, and met a lot of boys in the process.

J.S. tapped his beer bottle on the bar, shaking her back to the present. "So what's the wager gonna be this time?"

"That," Keith said, "is yet to be decided."

Rene leaned down and tested her cue on the table. "Offer's up to you. It's your room, your table, remember?"

"Damn right. So are we talking money or something a little less tangible?"

"Dunno." She had the money now, but money seemed boring in terms of a wager between friends. Were they friends? She still hadn't figured that part out yet.

"Okay, how about if you agree to do anything I want for a whole day if I win and vice versa if you win?"

Rene felt her nose flare. "Too vague."

Keith and J.S. both laughed.

"Fair enough," Keith said. "I suppose it is a little vague. So let's say if you win, I do an extra weekend of t-shirt shuffling." He grinned that same cocky grin Buddy gave her in the past. "But if I win, you have to accompany me to the Unity Studio Gala they're having next weekend."

"A gala?" She felt her forehead wrinkle.

"Yes, a rather formal party."

What? Did she look like she had stupid stamped on her forehead or something? "I know what a gala is."

"Next weekend in the land of LA."

She shook her head no. "Sorry, doesn't sound like something I'm interested in."

“Why not?” J.S. asked before he turned to Keith and said, “I’ll go with you.”

Keith laughed. “I don’t think you’d work very well as a date.”

“A date?” Rene asked.

“Well, you know what I mean, a female companion. Is that better?”

Not much, she thought.

“You should go,” J.S. said. “You don’t get out enough.”

“Well, thank you so much for the assessment of my personal life. And your personal life is?”

J.S. frowned. “We aren’t talking about my personal life. We’re talking about yours.”

“No, we’re not,” Rene said. “You’re talking about mine. I’m just fine with it.”

“So you’re saying you’re afraid to go with me?” Keith asked.

Rene rolled her eyes. “I wouldn’t use the word afraid to describe it,” she lied.

“So what is it?” J.S. asked.

“Yes, what is it?” Keith asked.

Rene twirled her pool cue in her hand for a second. “Can J.S. come along?”

“Oh, no,” J.S. said. “You’re not putting me in the middle. No, siree. This bet is between the two of you.”

Rene frowned, but Keith laughed before he walked around the room and leaned against the wall beside her. “You can have your own room, if you like.”

She snorted. “I would most definitely like.”

“So it’s agreed, then?”

“No, I’m still thinking about it.”

Rene didn’t know if she liked the idea of going to Los Angeles, let alone an entire weekend. First, she found him attractive, but didn’t want to get involved with him. Second, she didn’t like the idea of dealing with the press, wild coked-up parties, or anything else his life might involve. Which brought about the final point, she didn’t know him well enough to spend a weekend with him, not even as a friend.

“Don’t worry about the gown,” Keith said. “I’ll make sure you have something appropriate to wear.”

Crap. A gown? She hadn't thought about wearing a gown. "That's saying you win the wager, right?"

"Of course."

"Enough, enough," J.S. said. "It's a reasonable wager, Rene. Either you're in or you're not."

Gee, thanks for the help, she thought. She wasn't sure it was reasonable. She wasn't even sure why Keith would want to make such a bet. Surely, he could take someone else. She was certain he had more than his share of women wouldn't be more than willing to go with him. So why her?

Keith moved away from the wall. "Of course, if you don't think you can win. . ."

Yeah, right. "Nope, I'm in."

They flipped for the break. She managed to run six out of her seven balls, minus the eight, before she missed a rather easy bank shot and had to give up the table.

Keith grinned. His blue eyes glittered with amusement. "Now, are you sure you didn't throw the table?"

"Don't worry. I'll get another shot."

J.S. coughed.

Not good, Rene thought. J.S. undoubtedly knew the extent of Keith's skill.

Keith walked the table. Rene bounced the cue stick on the tile floor until she noticed J.S. watching her and stopped. It was a nervous habit, and she didn't want either J.S. or Keith to think she was antsy.

Keith bent down and made his first shot. Nice. His second, third and fourth shots fell after. His fifth shot blocked behind the eight.

Rene started to relax. She figured she'd be up next. But Keith made the shot—three rails and in the corner pocket. Crap! She shifted on her feet as she watched him make the next three shots, clearing the table of all but her last ball.

J.S. clapped his hands and hollered. She heard herself congratulating Keith on a good game, but felt the knot already forming in her stomach and knew it would be one big bowling ball by the time next weekend arrived.

“So. . .,” Keith said. He walked around behind her and put his hands on both sides of her waist. “What size gown are we talking about here?”

Chapter 11

Jake

Virginia's apartment surprised Jake. The décor was warm, yet outdoorsy. The sofa had a light oak frame, which matched the balance of the hardwood furniture and paneling, with a thick, single, almost feather bed cushion. Several Indian artifacts hung from the walls and scattered the end tables.

Virginia slipped around him and through the door leading into another room, what Jake assumed to be the bedroom. "I'll be right back," she said in a rushed voice.

"Take your time."

Jake had time, plenty. That was the good thing about coming to Whitefish. Sure, he had to put in a few daily telephone calls to check on the business and the people he put in charge. He also had to figure out what to do about Rene and Rancey. But the rest felt like a vacation. Not that Montana rated as one of his planned vacation spots. Paris, London, Honolulu perhaps, but he never had much desire to visit the mountains, although as he walked around Virginia's apartment, he wondered about it. Virginia seemed settled in, comfortable. Rene obviously liked the place, too. There must be something to living in the middle of nowhere.

He stopped in front of a tall oak rack at the far end of the room. It had shelves across the top, middle and bottom. The middle shelf had holes cut in a horizontal line, and a dozen or so fishing rods poked through, trapped in place, with lures dangling from the tips in a flutter of color and feathers.

The arrangement caused him to consider his own apartment. Leather, marble, chrome and glass with white walls and polished light oak floors. It was neat, no, beyond neat. His housekeeper kept it spotless. Yet, it was impersonal. His decorations didn't show a single thing about him, or what he liked to do.

The door into the other room was cracked open. He could hear Virginia moving about, and the smooth sounds of clothing sliding to the floor or onto her body. "You like to fish?" he asked.

"Yeah, it's kind of a hobby of mine."

A rock collection spread across a set of split wood shelves. The rocks were placed in a careless, unarranged fashion, as though Virginia dropped them there whenever she came home with a new one. Her rock kit, or what he thought to be a rock kit, was lying on a bookcase filled with worn books. He picked up *For Whom the Bell Tolls* by Ernest Hemingway. At least he'd heard of it. He thumbed through the pages, stopping only long enough to read a few notes scribbled in the margins, before putting it back on the shelf.

Did he have any hobbies? His forehead wrinkled. None that he could think of—well, except for women. Perhaps they were a hobby. He certainly spent enough time on them.

“What do you fish for?” he asked.

“Oh, mostly trout, sometimes bass.”

“Trout's good. What kind of bait do you prefer?”

“Depends on the weather, time of year, time of day, you know, but I generally prefer chub tail. It's probably the best all-round bait, if you aren't specializing.”

“Yeah, probably.” He didn't know. Fishing didn't interest him.

His fingers paused on the ski board he was looking at as he considered what sex might be like with a woman as physically fit as Virginia. Strong. Forceful perhaps. Maybe that was where he was going wrong. He wasn't picking women with enough strength.

Virginia certainly looked fit enough, and as far as he could tell from the cursory look around her apartment, she skied and hiked as well as fished, or at least had the gear. He figured she did, though. She had a small, compact body with small bones and small breasts. The small-boned part he didn't mind. The small breasts were a drawback, though. Not that he hadn't had sex with small-breasted women before. He had. Several. Maybe more than several. It was just that he preferred larger ones and getting what he preferred wasn't a problem.

Jake wondered when he started thinking of women purely by their physical attributes, or even when he came to understand they obsessed him. He wasn't sure. Sometime after Rene left. And later, after he dated a half dozen or so, he realized they all looked like Rene, but he wasn't sure about the exact date it happened, or even the year.

Some people thought he had no idea how to treat a woman, but women let him treat them however he wanted. They considered him good-looking. Plenty of them had told him. But looks could easily be lost with raggedy clothing or a dirty face, and considering how the old

farts in his line of work made out, he figured money had to be the deciding factor, or maybe the power.

Being second in command, a lot of people thought what he did amounted to power. That old breaking-legs stereotype, he supposed, but he'd never broken anyone's legs, and he'd never killed anyone.

Virginia burst into the room and spun around before him. "What do you think?"

"Nice, very nice," he said, and he wasn't lying. She did look nice. Plain black dress. Not too short, not too long. A locket hanging on a thin gold chain around her neck. She even managed to fluff her hair out and fasten it down in such a way it looked tame, although he liked the wild, curly look she had when he picked her up from the shop.

"Thanks," she said.

Jake took her by the hand and led her out to the car, opening the door and seating her before he climbed in. It didn't take them long to make their way to the restaurant. Whitefish wasn't big. One giant loop and a person could see the whole town in less than an hour.

The restaurant was nice, an old converted sawmill, which explained the name Fine Mill Dining. The tables were made of tree trunks, slicked about five inches thick and shellacked to a high natural gloss, with thick-padded barrel chairs. Old woodworking tools hung from the walls, and a stone fireplace heated the room in a soft amber glow of crackling embers.

Once the hostess seated them, the waiter took their order and returned with a bottle of 1999 Carneros Pinot Noir, Jake leaned back in the seat and focused on Virginia. Her fingers trembled as she lifted her wine glass. Maybe it was because she didn't know him, or at least he supposed that was what she thought made her nervous. If she knew him, who knew, it might have made her even more nervous.

Jake reached across the table and took her hand. "You really do look nice."

Virginia smiled. Her face lit up and her freckles bunched together across the top of her nose. "Thanks."

"So tell me about your day." Jake wanted her to talk a little, but he also wanted to find out as much as he could about Rene, how he might approach the situation.

"Well, you won't believe this." Excitement brushed her face. "But Keith North was working in the store today."

“Keith North? The actor?”

Virginia rolled her eyes. “I know. I could barely believe it myself. He apparently lost some bet with Rene and has to work in the store for three days. Of course, I’m not going to be there the next couple of days, since they’re my days off, but, man oh man, could that guy sell t-shirts.” Virginia clicked her tongue and shook her head before she went on to describe the people, how they reacted, how much they purchased, and other details.

Jake smiled and settled back into his seat, while he watched Virginia talk, her hands move with quick jerks. He was glad to hear Rene hadn’t lost her fondness for the wager. It might turn out to his advantage, even though he recalled how stupid he felt the first time he tried to take her.

It had been at Phil Matio’s house shortly after he met her and taken her up on the offer to join into the “real” business of stealing versus the petty shoplifting or toss and roll he’d been doing beforehand. Phil was running him and a few other guys through the drill. Do this. Don’t do that. And sure as hell, never do anything that would lead them back to the rest of us.

Afterwards, he sat on a barstool and watched Rene and Catherine play a game of cue.

Rene stood at the end of the table, tightening the balls in the rack, her eyes fixed on the green felt, until she stepped aside. Catherine slammed the break when Rene looked at him.

He remembered thinking she had the most startling gray eyes and brilliant white smile he’d ever seen. He already figured her for twenty, maybe twenty-one, nothing like the girls hanging out in his neighborhood.

She and Catherine smacked the balls around on the table for a half an hour or so, mostly banking wild-ass shots no one could make. He liked the fact Rene wore jeans, yet managed to make them look feminine by adding a silk, hot-pink shirt. It set off her dark hair and gray eyes, like a bright flash of lightning during the middle of a storm. He wondered if she might be interested in hooking up with an eighteen-year-old. Not that he knew if it was possible. She could’ve been attached. He didn’t know much about her beyond the obvious.

After they finished, Catherine left the room, and Rene stood at the end of the table with her legs slightly spread, looking at him, running the pool stick up and down in her hands, and bouncing the rubber bottom on the floor. He remembered thinking no woman in her right mind would put off a signal like that without meaning it, but just as he was about to say something—

try to make a little small talk with her—she stopped, blushed, and looked at the floor. The act made him smile. He figured she knew, or at least figured out, what he was thinking, and that excited him even more.

She looked up and motioned him over. He faked surprise by looking around him, first left, and then right, and then behind him at the wall, before pointing to his chest and saying, “Me?”

She nodded. “Yes, you.”

Jake jumped off the bar stool and tucked his shirt into his pants. He knew he had to play it cool. Catherine was Phil’s daughter, and he figured Rene was a friend of the family or maybe a cousin. Getting to know her better sounded good, but he didn’t want to piss Phil off. Phil had the money.

“How about playing me a game?” Rene asked him.

“Okay.” He walked over and pulled a pool cue from the rack. “What’s your preference?”

“Oh, nine ball ought to do it. I’m getting kind of tired of eight ball, but I need the practice.”

Practice at what? he recalled thinking, but decided to keep his mouth shut. No harm in playing a game or two.

Wade Fielding took a seat at the bar as Jake adjusted his pants and walked to the end of the table to rack. Wade was a stout old guy, a close friend of Phil’s, or at least as far as Jake could figure out.

“Think you can beat her?” Wade asked.

“Sure, why not?” Jake chalked his cue.

Rene turned her back and said something to Wade that made Wade laugh and slap his knee before she turned around and waved her arm out over the table. “Are you good at this? I mean, do you think you could maybe teach me a little something?”

“If you want.”

“Well, how about if we make a little wager then? Wade, here, has told me. . .I dunno. . .at least a dozen or so times that I’ve gotta learn how to place a reasonable wager or I’m gonna wind up in trouble when I go to Riley’s.”

“Riley’s, huh?”

“Yeah, you know, the pool hall on—”

“I know. I’ve played there. So what kinda bet do you wanna make?”

The tip of her cue stick twirled the small blue chalk cube for a minute. Then she turned to Wade to ask something. It sounded as though she said, “What do you think?”

Wade shook his head “It’s your ass, Rene, not mine.”

She had a serious look on her face when she turned back around. “Hmm. . .well, how about for something simple, like a kiss?”

Jake felt his groin tighten. His feet shifted against the carpet.

Rene said, “If I win, I get to kiss you however I want, but if you win, you get to kiss me however you want.”

“Okay,” Jake said, “anything you like.”

He hadn’t known she was going to run the table on him and then tell him how she wanted a kiss was no kiss at all. The whole room had burst out laughing at him. He’d never felt that embarrassed before, and he didn’t think he’d ever felt that embarrassed since.

Of course, that changed once they’d gotten together. Rene kissed him plenty then. Long, sensual kisses. Hot, urgent kisses. Every type of kiss imaginable. But that was then, and this was now, and he had a nice looking woman in front of him with a rather lopsided, puzzled look on her face.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Virginia asked.

Jake leaned forward and poured her another glass of wine when the waiter delivered their food. “I was just thinking how nice it is to listen to you talk.”

“My mother tells me I use my hands too much.”

“No, not at all. They lend to your excitement.”

“Well, it was an unusual day.”

Jake laughed and took a sip of his wine. “Do you suppose this North guy and Rene hooked up?”

Virginia laughed. “Hooked up?”

“Yeah, you know—”

“Yes, I know what hooked up means. It just isn’t the type of word I could imagine someone using with Rene.”

Jake watched a waiter moving through the tables with a tray held high above his head before he began tracing his finger along the edge of the wine glass. The sound of metal pans clanking against each other came from the kitchen as another waiter rushed through with a plate of pasta, leaving the distinct smell of meat sauce and garlic, matching the smell of his own food before him.

“Well,” Virginia said, “I’m not sure Rene exactly hooks up with anyone. I mean, I don’t know her all that well outside of the shop, but I’ve never seen her with anyone, except for her ex, and I don’t think she’s the type who would just hook up with a man without getting to know him.”

Ex? Ex-husband? Ex-lover? Jake looked away at the waiter again. He needed to think and didn’t want Virginia to get suspicious about why he might be asking so many questions. “What do you think’s up with that?”

“I dunno.” Virginia picked at the food on her plate. “Are you interested in hooking up with her? If you are, I think I should warn you that I’m not into threesomes.”

Jake laughed. He couldn’t remember the last time a woman both asked and told him something like that so directly. He liked the fact she had balls and was willing to show them. “No, but if I decide I want a threesome, I’ll remember you’re definitely not up for it.”

Virginia frowned a moment and then smiled once she realized he was kidding. Not that he would mind. Rene and Virginia would probably make a good pair in the sack, but he preferred the one-on-one approach, and Rene had already proven she was enough to dominate any man when it came to sex. Virginia seemed like a passive sort. Well, maybe not. She did speak her mind. Maybe he was wrong about how physically aggressive she might be.

“I saw your rock collection,” he said.

“Yeah?”

“On the wall in your apartment.”

“I’ve been meaning to varnish those shelves, but I just haven’t gotten around to it. I’m not real serious about rocks, though. I mean I like them, but I just don’t know what they are. I’ve been thinking about taking a course in geology so I can learn more about them.”

Virginia went on to talk about how she’d read the Rocky Mountains were formed and how she wanted to know more about it, as well as the different types of trees, insects, wildlife,

and everything around her. Jake considered how different she was from the other women he dated. She actually thought about something other than sex or what she might be able to wrangle out of him. Of course, she didn't know what he might have to offer. A comfortable thought.

He ate his dinner and listened, stopping to ask an occasional question. Her conversation washed over him like warm water. The feeling was one he hadn't experienced in a long time, more years than he could count. He liked Virginia.

"You know," Jake said.

Virginia looked up from her wine glass and brushed a curl from her face. "What?"

"I don't think I've met anyone like you before. You're very intense."

"I'm sorry. I tend to get carried away with stuff."

"No, no, don't be sorry." Jake looked her over a second before adding, "I like listening to you. I think you're pretty amazing."

Virginia smiled and light pink flushed her cheeks.

Maybe this won't be so bad after all, Jake considered.

Chapter 12

Rene

Rene looked out through the oval, slide-shuttered window. The smooth cotton loops of the airline seat felt coarse against her silk pants, and the metal seatbelt clip rubbed at her hip. The geometric patterns of houses and landscape appeared and disappeared through the light wisps of afternoon clouds. The air in the plane smelled bottled. She hated flying. She felt as though she was trapped in a huge roasting pan waiting to be basted.

“You okay?” Keith asked.

“Yeah,” she said, but she wasn’t. She felt raw, and she’d felt that way ever since she knew she was stuck going to the gala. Refusing wouldn’t work. That wasn’t the way wagers went. She expected people to pay up, so she had to meet her obligations.

“Want another drink?” Keith asked.

“No, thanks.” She wasn’t used to riding first class. The flight attendants seemed to be in constant fluttering, fluffing, and pouring motion. Light perfume scents followed them.

“You know,” Keith said. “I’m really glad you’re attending this gala with me.”

Rene watched an attendant pull a blanket from an overhead compartment and place it with a light puff over a gentleman in the seat in front of them who’d drifted to sleep.

“It probably won’t be pleasant,” Keith said.

Rene didn’t respond. She didn’t know what to say. Keith looked concerned. His forehead was furrowed, and his blue eyes seemed darker.

“I’m guessing my ex-fiancée will be there.”

Rene scowled. She knew she did. Her forehead wrinkled and the left side of her mouth scrunch into a knot.

“I’m sure you’ve probably heard about that.”

Rene figured there was no point in beating around about it. “No, I haven’t. In fact, I didn’t even know who you were until we met, and I’ve never seen any of your movies.” A shimmer of surprise crossed his face. He looked boyish when his demeanor cracked. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No, no, that’s okay,” he said. “I suppose I’m just surprised that not everyone knows what a shit I am.”

Rene could feel her eyebrows tighten again. Damn. She wished she could hide her emotions better. Every time she thought anything, it popped out on her face like a pimple.

“I’m not really a shit,” he said. “Well, maybe a little bit of a shit.”

“That’s not surprising.” There, that’s better. Dazzle him with humor. At least it would make the pimple disappear.

Keith laughed. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, but I would imagine most Hollywood types are.”

“Hmm, I suppose you’re right. People expect it from us, or at least some of us.”

They both sat quietly a moment. Keith flagged the flight attendant for another scotch. Neat. Always neat. What else did she know about him? Outside of a couple of wagers and his taste for good scotch, she didn’t know anything—his family, his life in Hollywood, his career. Nothing.

Asking J.S. was out-of-the-question. She didn’t want J.S. to get the idea she was interested in Keith for more than an acquaintance. Reading up on him? The press was too unreliable. Asking someone else? Who in the world would she ask? Virginia didn’t seem to know him beyond his name and his movies. She wondered if anyone in Whitefish really knew him. Or was that the point, to get away from everything?

She supposed she’d find out soon enough. Maybe that’s why he asked her to come, so they could get to know one another. After all, he seemed to like J.S., and she and J.S. were packaged in the same cellophane, stuck together like chocolate.

“How old are you?” Rene asked.

“What?”

“Was the question rude?”

“No,” Keith said, “not rude, it’s just...never mind, I’m thirty-one, why?”

“I’m thirty-three.”

“Ah, an older woman.”

Rene winced and smacked his leg with the magazine she was holding. *Flight News*. Scarcely a top-notch reading adventure, but a good weapon.

Keith smiled. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"Sure you didn't."

"Seriously. I love older women."

Rene snorted. "I'll bet."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I was kidding."

Keith laughed. "I wasn't."

Rene didn't like the direction the conversation was moving. "I was just thinking how little I know about you."

Keith picked up his scotch and took another drink. She could feel herself breathing. She couldn't understand why asking something like that would make her feel so nervous.

"Well," he said. "I suppose I could sum up the highlights for you. Thirty-one. You already know that. Child of Donald and Sylvia North, now Sylvia Ramsey. My father has made sixty-seven movies to date and appeared on eleven television programs, but he's still acting, so the figures will undoubtedly run much higher before he decides to retire. He's won an Oscar, an Emmy, and a Golden Globe. He also won several smaller awards. My mother has made a number of movies and won a Gemini for her work on a Canadian television program, but she predominantly works on the stage. They divorced when I was four. My mother remarried when I was ten, or was it eleven? No, ten, it was definitely when I was ten. I spent most of my years growing up with my grandparents, my mother's parents. I went to various schools, mostly military schools, because I was apparently a handful. I was married briefly, and I've been engaged twice." He stopped and smiled. "And I lost my virginity at fifteen."

Rene laughed.

"Anything else you want to know?"

"Yeah," she said as solemnly as she could muster. "How'd you lose your virginity, when did you start drinking scotch, and who taught you how to shoot cue?"

Keith laughed and sat his drink on the console between them. "My my, you're full of serious questions, aren't you?"

"Yep, that's me. Ms. Seriousity."

He laughed again. Rene thought laughter was good for him.

“Well, let’s see, Rebecca Turent at fifteen... oh, I already told you that. In the back of a VW bus, and before you say it, yes, I know that sounds more sixties than seventies, but what the hell. I was apparently lagging behind. The scotch at about eight, although not seriously until I hit about twenty or so. And the cue...” He stretched the word out as though it didn’t quite want to roll off his tongue. “My grandfather taught me, but I went on to refine it during my military school days. There wasn’t much else going on in an all-boys school.”

“I see.” Rene decided to keep up her mock seriousness. “Why’d you move to Montana?”

“Ah. . .that’s the part I was trying to tell you about.” Keith picked up his glass of scotch again. “I had to get away from L.A. when my fiancée dumped me.”

“You? Dumped?”

“Yeah.” He laughed, but Rene thought the laugh didn’t sound very light-hearted.

“Well, she must have been some kind of bitch.”

Keith spit a light mist of scotch over the seat in front of them. “Can women say that?” He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and looked for a cocktail napkin.

“Well, I just did, didn’t I?”

Keith looked at her. His eyes were pure blue, thoughtful. “You did at that, but somehow I never imagined it of you.”

Rene looked at her magazine again and thumbed through the pages. She knew she startled him. She had that effect on men, period. Not because she considered herself such a delicate little thing she couldn’t speak her mind, but most men, she’d come to realize, preferred she didn’t.

“So what about you?” Keith asked.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you, what’s your story?”

Rene felt her face pinch.

“Oh, come on, it couldn’t be that bad, could it?”

Yes, compared to his story, it’s a Stephen King weirdmare, she thought.

“Not the sanitized stuff, either. I want the full scoop.”

Rene hesitated. How would he react if she just blurted everything out? Would he turn around and take her back home? Well, that wouldn't be such a bad thing, would it? Going to a Hollywood bash wasn't her idea of fun, anyway.

"Okay," she said. "Nothing sanitized. I was both raised and adopted by two crime families. I attended a normal suburban high school and later studied auto mechanics at a vocational school. I went into my adoptive family's business at seventeen and became extremely good at it, but decided it was time to leave when I turned twenty-four."

Rene glanced up to see Keith's reaction. His expression appeared calm.

"I fell in love twice. I lived with one man, who you've already had the pleasure of meeting. I was married once to a man I didn't love," she said. "Oh, and I lost my virginity at seventeen, to a man who looked incredibly like you." That ought to do it.

Keith raised his eyebrows and took another drink of scotch. "How'd you say you lost your virginity?"

Rene laughed. "Very well, considering the time and place."

The onboard speaker system crackled. Rene leaned forward in her seat and placed her magazine into the pocket in front of her. Saved by the loud speaker.

"We are now getting ready to make our final approach to Los Angeles International Airport," the pilot's voice grated. "The time is 4:15 p.m. Pacific Standard Time. The weather is partly cloudy and balmy with a ten percent chance of rain. Right now, it's seventy-eight degrees at the airport. Please fasten your seatbelts and remember to collect your onboard luggage upon departure. We hope your flying experience with Americana Airlines has been a pleasant one, and we wish you a good stay during your time in Los Angeles."

Keith flagged the attendant and handed over his glass. He adjusted his seatbelt as the plane made its descent.

Rene looked out the window at the land of LA. All concrete and cars. She wondered if they did any street dragging. She wondered if Keith would be putting her on the next flight back. The thought made her smile until the wheels of the plane skidded across the pavement, and the jolts rushed through her body.

Chapter 13

Jake

Jake sat, watching the crowd of people coming through the doors at LAX airport. The sliding doors stopped, glued to their frames. He leaned forward on the rental car bench and rested his arms on his knees. The cars made a hollow, echoing sound when they roared past. The fumes coming from the concrete around him made his stomach pitch and his head pound. Just as he was about to stand to pace a little and stretch, an airline porter appeared, tugging a cart with two pieces of luggage, with North and Rene following.

North swaggered, not much, but enough to tell he had a few drinks. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt. So was Rene, although her t-shirt fit tighter and showed a slash of her taut brown stomach. The porter held up his hand, and a limo eased its way to the yellow curb markings.

North opened the door, and Rene slid inside. The act caused Jake's mind to play across the past—how he'd done the same. Opened doors, pulled out chairs, held coats, all for Rene.

Jake wondered if Keith was boinking her. Not that it mattered. No, it mattered. For several reasons, but he figured North wouldn't stick around long enough for it to amount to much, if anything.

North's past, or at least the last year of his past, made him predictable. Too many press releases. Too many photographs. Too many rumors. He never stuck with the same woman for long. He couldn't even stay away from the bottle long enough to make a movie.

Jake pulled out a cigarette, tapped it on the front of the pack, and thought about what Gar would think if he found out his daughter was screwing one of the players in the biggest financial screw-ups they'd swallowed in years. The North-Kandet split not only put a dent in plans to take over Unity, but cost the business a bundle in the process.

It wasn't that North or Kandet were tied to Unity. Contracted actors didn't exist. But the studio still hinged on their success, or had until the owners restructured their efforts. Before the breakup, Kandet brought in five major box office hits and an Oscar. North, whose films floated between studios, wasn't quite as profitable, but still landed Unity two major and one minor box office hits. Both of them brought in a sizeable chunk of the dollars.

Unfortunately, their appeal came from their unblemished, young American lovers image. Something their engagement, and the press hype around it, strengthened and brought in funding for six new films—three for Kandet, two for North, and one joint project. It also attracted Gar. Big dollars coupled with money laundering opportunities for the taking.

Jake had to admit the package sounded appealing. That was, until the split nearly ripped the studio and a couple production companies apart. Whoever said, “All publicity is good publicity,” was an idiot. When the press went after a major headliner—like they did both Kandet and North—everyone took a financial blow.

With Kandet, the press snapped up her hysterical fits and showed her to be the bitching dog in heat she was. And North? Shit. He just came off like a drunken asshole who couldn’t keep his pants zipped.

Project funding disappeared, and Gar, along with the other stockholders, wound up tied to the stakes with wood stacked and the match lit. Gar was still interested in grabbing up the majority of Unity stock and taking over, but not until it fully recovered.

Jake wasn’t sure he wanted to tell Gar about Rene’s association with North. At least not right away. He had a bad feeling like a chunk of cement tied to his chest whenever he thought about what Gar asked him to do. There had to be another way around the problem. He just needed some time to figure out what.

The limo was still sitting at the curb. Rene was inside. Fans pressed up around North, shoving tablets and pieces of paper out for him to autograph.

Jake surveyed the crowd and saw a man standing by the valet station with a briefcase in his hand. Well, hello, Agent Rancey, you shit. His eyes followed the direction Rancey was looking, and he realized two other men were doing the same. Now, that’s interesting. He watched while one of the men tracked Rancey’s stare, while the other feigned interest in a brochure.

The men didn’t appear interested in North, so Jake assumed they were after Rancey. One of the men’s eyes moved along with Rancey as he paced back and forth.

Jake wished he had his car phone, but he didn’t. They didn’t put them in rentals, and he hadn’t thought to bring his portable from Montana, so he walked to the nearest pay phone,

shoved a handful of quarters into the slot, and punched out Gar's private number with brisk clicks.

"Yeah," a gruff voice came on the line.

"Just thought I'd let you know how the hunting trip was going."

"Yeah?" Normally, Jake would have wondered if the guy knew any other word, but in Gar's case, he already knew.

"I managed to spot that doe you were talking about with a big buck right behind her. The buck apparently just got sprung from the trap he'd been in for awhile."

"Surprised a buck could get loose like that," Gar said. A space of dead air followed.

"So'd you bag her?"

"Nah, the doe got away, and all I managed to get was a rabbit."

"Rabbit's good eating, if you like 'em."

"This one seems a little stringy for my tastes, but I thought I might let her soak a while and see if she turns out better."

"Good thinking," Gar said. "You see any coyotes up there?"

"Yeah, one in Montana and again in L.A. with a couple of wolves on its tail."

"Wolves, huh?"

"Two of them, kind of burly, kind of scarred up, looks like they've been in more than their share of scraps."

"So you're in L.A.?"

"I decided to take a side-trip."

"Well, don't let them movie starlets grab you," Gar said.

The next thing Jake heard was a click. His own click followed, and he decided it was time to follow the men following Rancey. It was tail chasing, but what the hell. It might produce something.

Chapter 14

Keith

Morning sunlight filtered through the patio doors and surrounding glass windows into the breakfast room. The swimming pool beyond glittered against the sun, and ripples of water created by the November breeze lapped at the sides. It was a great day in Los Angeles, or at least an unusual one.

A night of clubbing, under most circumstances, would've left Keith exhausted with a throbbing headache, but not this morning. No, last night, he decided to lay off the liquor. He didn't figure Rene for the straight-up scotch type, but he was wrong. Eight shots, J&B neat, straight up with a few Cokes inbetween. Before, he'd never seen her drink anything stronger than a draft, and even that was light—one or two drinks on the outside—but not last night, not at the Outtrigger. There, she went all out.

At first, he watched her with amusement. She hit a couple of shots. Her voice slurred a bit. She gave him a few drunken hugs and danced with the people he introduced her to, friends in one form or another. But after a while, and several shots later, he started feeling uneasy. She was too drunk, and the one thing he knew was that he knew Hollywood. It was a city of golden streets and garbage. There were people who could make a person rich, and others who could strip a person clean, and his running buddies weren't the exception. They could eat Rene up without dropping a cent, or a single regret.

His concerns were groundless, though. Nothing happened. She pushed a few men off when the music shifted to slow numbers, and they tried to hold her too close. She even threw a drink in Guy Trimble's face for groping her ass. But nothing else, nothing he needed to protect her from. Even drunk, Rene managed herself better than most women.

Keith poured himself another cup of coffee and returned the carafe to the center of the table when Rene entered the room. She was wearing a cream-colored nightgown and matching silk robe cinched around her waist. Her hair was still fluffed out and rumpled from sleep. She sat down in the seat across from him and rubbed her eyes as he poured some coffee for her.

“Thanks,” she said. The light scent of baby powder wafted from the movement of her arms. Her lips went to the edge of the cup and sipped at the steaming mixture. “Hmm, tastes good. Cinnamon?”

“Yes,” he said. “I like it that way.”

She held her head a moment, and then said, “Could you excuse me for a minute?”

“Sure.” Keith smiled as he watched her go down the hallway to the restroom. A cold splash in the face, no doubt.

Closing the nightclubs in L.A. wasn’t an easy feat. Most people couldn’t do it. Hell, he even had trouble himself at times, but Rene managed. Of course, she fell asleep in the car on the way home. Not that he wouldn’t have done the same, if he’d been in her condition. But he liked the way she tucked herself into the crook of his arm. He liked being the levelheaded one for a change.

The driver was taking the corners easy. The night air felt cool and clean drifting through the open window. Everything was going okay until they made their way down Hollywood Boulevard, three miles from the club. Then he noticed a pair of headlights floating behind them. He figured it was the paparazzi. No big deal. At first, he even thought about ignoring them, just letting them tag along and snap up a few pictures. It wasn’t as though he had something to hide. He was blazing sober, something the press would consider an anomaly. But Rene wasn’t, and he knew fending off flashbulbs, especially when drunk and barely awake, wasn’t the most pleasant experience.

“Lose the car,” he said.

His driver didn’t waste any time. The limo lurched forward, and they chased down a dozen or so side streets, taking several sharp turns. A hard one-eighty circle to the right and Rene’s head jarred against his shoulder. Keith smiled down at her. She mumbled something, and he tightened his grip around her shoulders to keep her steady.

It wasn’t until they pulled into the confines of the garage that he let go of her. His driver got out and held the car door open while Keith went around, looped one arm beneath her legs and the other behind her back.

“Need any help?” the driver asked.

“Nope,” he said, sliding her out and pulling her sleeping form against his body. “It’s a piece of cake when you’re sober.”

“That it is, sir.”

Keith carried her inside the house and down the hallway to her room. She hugged him around the neck and said, “Thanks,” when he deposited her onto the bed. But as soon as her head found the pillow, she fell asleep again.

He stood beside the bed, staring at her for a minute. Her short skirt exposed her bare thighs, and he could see the light tufts of hair at the edge of her panties. His thoughts ran across how easy it would be to take advantage of the situation. Crawl in bed. Play with her. Kiss her. He knew he could have her. Shit, he even knew he wanted her. It wasn’t as though she hadn’t put out the right signals. She hadn’t kissed him outright or told him that she wanted him, but she’d laughed and given him drunken hugs when he pulled her into his lap at the Outrigger.

“You’re all right, North,” she managed to slur out between drinks.

“That’s me. An all right guy.”

She buried his face in the soft, sweaty mounds of her breasts when she threw her arms around his head, and he could feel her heart beating. The inseams of his pants grew tight. He shifted in the chair, moving her bottom away from his crotch. His friends laughed when he came back up for air.

“You’re losing it, North,” Charlie Denth said. “You’re really losing it.”

Keith knew his pals expected him to cop a few public feels or nibble her breasts through her shirt at the very least, but he couldn’t. Not at the nightclub. Not even later in the bedroom. J.S. kept popping into his head like a Catholic confessional.

Keith wondered about that. Why did he care what J.S. thought? Was J.S. starting to feel more like a friend than an employee? So what if he was? Rene deserved something outright, even if J.S. wasn’t in the picture.

She was a decent woman. He invited her to L.A. He should at least make her feel safe. It bothered him that he felt the need to be so honest with her, though. Not that he lied to women. He didn’t, but he didn’t tell them everything, either. Well, hell, why should he? Most of them acted as though they already knew everything about him.

Rene slid into the chair across the table from him again. She looked more awake. Her face was pink from a fresh scrubbing, and her hair was brushed smooth.

“Did you enjoy yourself last night?” he asked.

She nodded.

“You sure tied one on.”

Her face flushed. “Did I embarrass you? I don’t usually—”

“Embarrass me?” The thought made him laugh. “No, no, I don’t think you could embarrass me considering the shenanigans I’ve pulled at nightclubs in the past.”

Rene smiled and slid the newspaper toward her.

Oh no, you don’t, Keith thought. “I need to talk about something, though. That is, if you think you’re up to it.”

Rene placed the newspaper aside. Her forehead wrinkled as though she knew what he was about to say.

Keith hesitated, but his need to be honest nagged at him like a toothache. “What you told me yesterday—”

“You know, I meant to tell you last night.” She bit at the bottom corner of her lip. “But I’d be okay if you decided you didn’t want to take me to this gala thing. I know there’ll be a lot of reporters hanging around. Heck, there already have been. And it’s one thing to go to a nightclub with someone who’s associated with a crime family, but it’s an entirely different thing to—”

“No, that isn’t it. That isn’t it at all.”

Rene looked at him.

Keith realized what a startling effect her gray eyes had, so intense. They mirrored her emotions. “I wanted to tell you that I hired a private investigator to check you out.”

She looked down and picked up her spoon. She stirred her coffee before adjusting her napkin.

“Nothing personal,” he said.

“Of course.”

Keith took a small bite of his toast and chewed at it, taking a moment to judge her reaction. Her face appeared featureless—no smile, no frown, nothing to indicate her thoughts.

The toast tasted grainy. He set it aside. Rene's eyes stayed focused on her coffee as she blew across the surface before taking a sip.

Keith picked up his own cup and took a drink before saying, "I just wanted to let you know that you didn't tell me anything yesterday I didn't already know. I'm glad you trusted me enough to tell me yourself, though. You can't imagine how good that made me feel."

"I doubt you know everything, but I'm glad you approve."

Approve? He wasn't sure that was the right word. Accept. Understand. Yes. Approve. No. In fact, he wasn't quite sure what to think. He only knew that after J.S. introduced him to Rene, he decided it was time he learned a little more about both of them.

His private investigator, or "Rocks" as most people called him, no doubt because the guy looked like a big pile of rocks, seemed to think most of it was routine. J.S. had a clean record until his aggravated assault charge and subsequent trip to prison. A couple prison guards said J.S. was a model prisoner, although Rocks noted some discrepancies in the release paperwork. Nothing that negated the release, more to do with the way someone processed the paperwork.

The report was otherwise clean and straightforward with the only notable thing being Rene. When Rocks reached that part, he rubbed at the tip of his flattened nose.

"I don't know if you know this," Rocks said, "But Rene Matio's. . .well, she's Mafioso."

Keith felt his stomach pitch, but he did his best not to show it. He expected something to show up, maybe a criminal record like J.S., maybe a crazed ex-husband, but not the Mafia.

Rocks tapped his fingers on the cover of the file folder on his desk in what seemed like a steady, nervous gesture. "Well, I don't know if you could describe the Matio family as Mafioso, but that's only her adoptive family. Her real family is Agite."

Keith listened as Rocks explained that Phil Matio was Rene's adoptive father and, at one time, ran a small, yet lucrative multi-state receiving stolen property scam. Rocks said he wasn't sure if they were involved in the actual theft of the items, although he admitted, if he were to guess, they probably were.

Keith couldn't figure out whether Rocks meant J.S. and Rene were involved in these activities, or if he just meant the Matio family in general. Either way, Keith decided against asking any more questions. He was certain Rocks didn't think much about the reason for the investigation. Investigating employees and new acquaintances was common in Hollywood. But

Keith wasn't sure how far Rocks's discretion might go. Money had a way of changing principles, and Rocks's principles might not run very deep if Rene's biological father was, indeed, part of the mob.

The more Rocks talked, the more his eyes kept flitting up from his file. He explained that Gar Agite's business included drugs, prostitution, gambling, and filmmaking. Keith figured the last bit of information at least provided Rocks with another reason for the inquiry, but for Keith, it caused another concern.

When he first met Rene, he thought it strange she lived in Whitefish for over ten years, and yet, he'd never met her before. Of course, even if they had run into one another, he might not have remembered her. There were so many people, so many fans, that he had a hard time keeping them straight, if he remembered them at all.

But still, the thought gave him an uncomfortable feeling Rene stayed to herself because she was running from something, maybe her past. If she was, then chances were high she pissed somebody off, and if that somebody was tied to the movie industry, and he got involved with her, he was likely to piss that same somebody off, too.

The guy in the tavern didn't seem very happy. But Rene's explanation about him being a former lover held solid with Rocks's report. One marriage. One live-in. Although Keith figured there was more to the guy than just a jilted lover. More plausible the fellow wanted to discuss something with Rene about her past. Rocks confirmed his thoughts when he told him the former lover, Jake Batella, worked for Rene's father.

And what about those men at the store the first day he spent fulfilling his debt? The one thrown from her office and the other two following didn't seem normal.

As his mind worked the situation over, Keith realized he was watching Rene too close. She was fidgeting in her chair, and even though she was ignoring him, she was sipping at her coffee in such a way he knew it was deliberate. He had to admit, she seemed undisturbed about his asking a private investigator to look her over. Her nervousness appeared to stem more from his eyes than anything he said.

Keith smiled at the slight redness coming to her cheeks. He pulled his napkin from his lap and placed it on the table. "Do you feel like taking a swim?"

Rene looked up. Her eyes shimmered with surprise. “Sure, I’m a great swimmer. Trust me, you don’t want to make any wagers on it. Unless you want to lose.” She smiled a quirky little smile that brought one corner of her mouth up more than the other before she got up and went off to her bedroom to change.

Her announcement amused him, but once they were in the water, he realized she hadn’t overrated herself. Rene was a strong swimmer. She crawled the length of the pool in smooth, graceful strokes and spun at the end of each lap to push-off against the side for the next. No breath. No stopping. Just continuous loops. She was right. He shouldn’t bet her on it. His swimming skills were strong, but no match for hers.

She looked good in her black, one-piece swimsuit. He was sure she picked the suit to cover herself as much as possible since it didn’t show any more skin than absolutely necessary. The suit still fit tight against her curves. And nothing, in his opinion, could’ve hidden her ample breasts even if she’d bundled up to her chin.

He wondered when it had become fashionable to start downsizing breasts. It seemed as though very few successful actresses had a build like Monroe any more. Andrea certainly didn’t. She was petite in all areas, even though she had a killer face. But Rene? Well, Rene was more like Monroe without the bleach blonde hairdo and the naïve, pouting disposition.

Rocks hadn’t mentioned anything about Rene’s first lover in his report—the one she and J.S. both said he resembled. J.S. was the one who first told him about the fellow, although J.S. acted more than a little strange when he talked about it.

“Shit, Buddy killed himself. Not outright, but he knew what he was doing, and he knew it was going to wind up that way. He might as well have blown his brains out. Same thing. Stupid-ass white boy.”

They were at the ranch eating dinner together. J.S. was telling him about Buddy’s car and how they chromed it out a few days after they were kicked out of school.

“So what happened?” Keith asked.

“What do you mean what happened?”

“I mean, how’d he die?”

J.S. placed his napkin on the table. “In a car.”

“I’m sorry.” Keith recalled how hot the room felt. How he could hear the slow drip of water coming from the kitchen.

“Don’t be,” J.S. said. “Rene tried to save him. Hell, I tried to save him. And I’m not ashamed to say I loved him, but there’s only so far a person can stretch.”

“I suppose I don’t understand. Neither you nor Rene could’ve prevented a car accident.”

“No, you don’t fucking understand.” J.S. jabbed his fork down hard against his plate. “Rene walked out on him. I walked out on him. What happened was no fucking accident.”

J.S. got up and left the table. Keith found himself stunned by the reaction. J.S. laughed. Sometimes J.S. moped. But he was usually a light-hearted person who never spoke bad about anyone, not even Hank, the field manager, who pissed everyone off from time-to-time.

Even now, Keith didn’t understand why J.S. felt responsible for the fellow’s death, but then again, he didn’t have any friends he felt that strongly about, or whose lives were so entwined with his own. He wondered if Rene felt the same way. Did being around him remind her so much of the guy that it made her angry at times? Or did it please her?

Keith slid into the water and swam to the end of the pool. As Rene neared him, he grabbed her foot.

“What in the . . .?” she sputtered.

He pulled her under. She came up laughing, and he splashed her in the face.

“Why, you. . .” she said.

His legs went out from under him before he even realized she went underwater. Twisting around, he managed to bring her up with him and pin her against the side of the pool. She struggled. He pressed harder.

Her chest rose and fell against his, and her eyes met his with defiance. “Let me go!”

“Not until you tell me about this man you lost your virginity to that looked incredibly like me.”

Rene pushed at his arms. He gripped the side of the pool harder. Finally, her eyes and face softened. His face was bare inches away from hers. She bit at her bottom lip, but he could tell her actions weren’t a sign of resignation. She seemed as though she was waiting for something, perhaps thinking about what course of action to take.

“So are you going to tell me?” he asked.

“No.” Her voice was firm, but her lips met his on the next breath.

The act surprised him, but it was a pleasant surprise. Her tongue tasted like a strange combination of lime and honey. He wrapped his arms around her waist and returned her kiss, chewing lightly at the fullness of her lips and letting his tongue find its way into her mouth until their lips parted, and he made his way to her earlobe.

He spoke softly. “Do I kiss incredibly like the guy as well?”

She squirmed away from him, climbed out of the pool, and walked away. He rested his chin on his folded arms stretched out across the pool ledge, hoping she would look back, but she didn’t. She kept walking toward the house and the sliding doors that led to her room. His instinct was to follow her, but he didn’t. He wasn’t sure if she wanted their relationship to go any further, and he wasn’t sure if he wanted it to, either. But the more he thought about that kiss, the tighter his swim trunks felt. Shit. Maybe a few laps were in order.

Chapter 15

Rene

Rene tugged at the low cut neckline of her gown. She tried to do it with as much grace as possible, but the man she was talking with glanced away with redness rising to his cheeks, so she knew her action wasn't as subtle as she hoped. She didn't know why she was fidgeting so much. There were plenty of women in the room with more skin showing, a lot more skin showing, but she still felt naked.

The gown was good. Not that she kept up on gown designs, but she could tell by the way the men, and even some of the women, appraised her when she walked in the door that Keith had made a good choice.

The gown, itself, fit okay. A little snug around the bosom and tightly cinched at the waist, but flared from the thighs downward, letting her move without doing an inch-step. The long-sleeved gloves, running up to her armpits, matched the black satin and fit tight on her fingers. Small crystal beads were sewn along the front and sides of the bodice, trailing down the back to the hem of the skirt.

She liked the beads. They made the gown look exotic. But keeping her balance in high-heeled sandals seemed like a challenge. How were women supposed to walk, let alone run, on such tiny little spikes?

"Have you known Keith long?"

She refocused her attention on the man standing in front of her. "Not really. We just recently met in Montana."

"I see."

After two or three conversations, Rene realized most people weren't interested in details. They came. They prattled for fifteen minutes or so about nothing of importance, and then, after the next person arrived, they moved on. It reminded her of a formal version of musical chairs.

The man beside her was still prattling. She listened politely as her eyes floated across the room, and realized her dislike of television and lack of movie viewing left her at a distinct disadvantage. What if someone came up to her? What if she should know who they were, but didn't? She'd wind up feeling stupid. Not to mention making Keith look bad.

She didn't see Keith anywhere. The last time she spotted him, he was chatting up a guy in a flaming pink tuxedo, but she couldn't find either one of them now. She noticed a woman in a tight red dress staring at her. Several men were circling the woman and talking with energetic hand gestures, but Rene couldn't hear what they were saying, even though she was close enough to appraise the woman as much as the woman was appraising her.

Blonde hair bordering on the edge of platinum, but not quite as brash, hung in casual looking curls around her pear-shaped face. A red, maybe ruby, comb affixed at the crown of her head, and she had light crystal blue eyes brilliant enough to grab the attention of anyone looking at her for more than a second.

Rene turned to ask the man chatting her up for the last fifteen minutes or so who the woman was, only to discover him gone, vanished. Leaning forward, she looked through the crowd. Perhaps he went for another gin. She peered up the staircase behind her. Maybe he left to play billiards. A loud female voice came from beside her. She turned and found the woman in the red dress standing next to her.

"You must be the lady of the hour," the woman said.

Rene laughed. "I wouldn't go that far, I'm—"

"Oh, your name doesn't matter, honey. Everybody already knows you're with Keith."

Ah, another fifteen-minute conversation, Rene thought.

The woman waved her arm out toward the crowd as if there was something specific she wanted Rene to see. Rene did her best to follow the direction the woman was pointing, but didn't understand what the woman wanted her to see.

The woman turned back to Rene and smiled. "You could probably ask any ten women here and find out he's had at least five of them."

Oh, one of Keith's ex-lovers, or maybe his ex-wife, or one of his two ex-fiancées. Probably the last ex-fiancée, the one Keith mentioned. Rene decided to keep her mouth shut.

The woman changed subjects. "I see Keith picked your gown for you. He always did have a taste for tight."

Rene smiled, shrugged, and held her hand out in an "oh well" gesture.

"I saw your picture in the rags."

The rags? Rene wondered.

“Taking you to a club where you’d dance and wind up looking like a drenched mule when you hit the press for the first time is so typical of Keith.” The woman’s voice was matter-of-fact. “Always the party animal, always making sure the press realizes he’d never settle for one woman when there’s a whole platter of them out there.”

Rene cocked her head with interest. She noticed the people around them had moved out a few feet. Most definitely the last ex-fiancée. “I suppose that’s for the best.”

The woman’s face flashed puzzlement before her eyes narrowed and hardened.

Rene wondered how she might fare against a Hollywood woman in a good old-fashioned catfight. The conversation was certainly shaping up to look like she was going to find out. But instead, the woman threw back her head and laughed. A hard, brash laugh with a sharp tone to it, but still a laugh.

“I imagine you wouldn’t care, now would you?” the woman asked after her laughing fit abated. “Unknown starlets rarely do.”

“Oh, I’m not a starlet. Keith’s just a one-nighter for me.”

“A one-nighter?” Keith’s voice came from behind her. His hand came to rest at the base of her spine. He reached up and moved a long strand of hair behind her shoulder. His lips brushed her cheek. “And I thought I was so much more to you than that.”

Rene smiled. Nice performance.

Keith turned to face the woman. “Nice to see you again, Andrea.”

“I’ll bet,” Andrea replied before she turned on her heels, leaving them both standing there, as she moved across the room in an irritated red, woodpecker flutter. Several men followed.

Rene felt her mouth gape.

“Sorry,” Keith whispered.

“What a woman.”

“What a bitch.”

Rene laughed. Keith signaled the waiter to bring another scotch. Rene noticed he’d finished off more than his fair share. She wondered how many others she hadn’t seen.

“Show’s over,” Keith said to the people tightening in around them. He leaned over and kissed her full on the mouth. “And my little lady, here, made it through without a single scratch.”

Some people tittered. Others laughed outright. One of the men she met last night came over and looped his arms around both of them. “Great job, you guys. Entertainment without bloodshed. Just the way we like it.”

Another man followed, a brother to the first, she thought. “Hope you don’t mind seeing your picture in the morning print,” he said with a big grin. “The paparazzi will never let that little Ice Princess moment get by them.”

Keith laughed. Rene forced a weak smile. She hadn’t seen any cameras, but she hoped the display wouldn’t cause Keith any trouble. Not that she wanted to go to this wingding to begin with, but she still didn’t want Keith’s career damaged over it.

Afterwards, Keith stayed close at her side as the party progressed, with the exception of a few minutes. When he returned, a light powder dusted his upper lip. She reached inside her black beaded purse and pulled out a Kleenex to wipe it away.

“Thanks,” he said, looking at her, his eyes probing, before he waved the bartender down for another scotch.

As Rene watched him, she began to get the feeling she might later wind up a bystander, while Keith shouted obscenities across the fence line at a neighbor. Maybe some Hollywood director who just happened to live across the way. Something she was sure wouldn’t go over well for future meetings with the fellow, especially if things were as one of her talking acquaintances had hinted, and Keith’s career was in a slump. Was the slump why he was drinking so much? Or was it just the thought of running into his old flame? She supposed it didn’t matter. After all, this was only a one-nighter.

Even though many people might have given their right forefinger to be invited to such a thing, the evening didn’t rate on her top-ten list. Not the worst, but definitely not the best. In fact, it wasn’t even close to being one of those moments she might like to remember when she sat, rocking away her retirement years.

She shook herself away from thinking about what would've, could've, should've been if Keith hadn't been drinking so much. He'd forgiven her easily enough for her own binge the night before. Surely, she could do the same for him now.

Oh crap! Not now! Pictures slammed through her head. Gun. Bullets. Duck! Rene shoved Keith to the floor and followed. The strap on her sandal broke on the way down, and her body landed hard on top of Keith.

A huff of air escaped him. "What the . . .?"

Gunfire cut him off. A whizzing sound went over their heads. And a bullet tinged off the marble wall behind them.

Another loud shot followed.

Rene looked up. Rancey ran past toward the exit. Two burly men in tuxedos followed. Their slick shoes slapped the marble as they made their way through the crowd.

People were screaming. Drinks slopped to the floor and splattered in an alcoholic mist. High heels and men's dress shoes mashed her fingers. Bodies bumped and fell over her.

Rene covered her head and pressed it against Keith's chest. She wondered why in the world Rancey shot at her. Or did he? Maybe he was protecting her from the two men chasing him.

A man beside her shouted, "You crazy bitch!"

She pulled her arm away from her face and looked up. The man had his fist in the air. His silver hair stuck out, and his cummerbund was askew. His face contorted with anger.

A woman's voice shrilled from across the room, "Crazy bitch!? You have some nerve calling me crazy bitch, you two-timing asshole!"

Another bullet pinged off the marble wall, this time beside the man. Rene watched him fall to the floor. Two pairs of polished shoes pounded and slid across the floor. The woman, whose blonde hair had come unfastened from its upsweep, continued shouting, waving a gun. The security guards grabbed her, ripping the side of her power-blue dress when they pinned her to the floor, and the gun spun across the marble.

The man stood up and brushed himself off before he moved toward the center of the room, his mouth dripping obscenities. Rene's eyes widened when two other security guards tackled Andrea.

The first woman rolled around, fighting, her hemline pushed up to her waist. Andrea hammered her fists at the pair on top of her.

“Get your bloody hands off of me, you lunatics!” Andrea shouted.

Two of Andrea’s admirers pulled at the arms of the guards, one protesting, “For Christ’s sake, she doesn’t even own a gun!”

After some discussion and the removal of a handbag, the two guards helped Andrea from the floor and began, what appeared to be, a profuse set of apologies. The other two guards slapped handcuffs on the woman in the powder-blue dress. The man, apparently the woman’s husband, shoved his finger in her face. “Look, you dumb bitch, I was only talking to her!”

Rene didn’t feel any movement beneath her. She looked down. Keith’s eyes were closed, and his breath was coming in slow jerks. Oh God, did he get hit? She got to her knees and started running her hands over his body, trying to find the bullet hole.

When her hand reached the top of his thigh, his eyes popped open and he grinned at her. “Not that I mind. But this is a really bad time to start feeling me up, since we can’t do anything about it here.”

Rene laughed. She couldn’t help it. Her hands went to her stomach, and laughter fell from her. At least he was okay. “Your eyes were closed, and I thought you were hurt.”

Keith stood up, helped her to her feet, and ran his hand through his hair. “I was just enjoying the moment.”

Turning to watch the security guards lead the woman in the power-blue dress off, she asked, “How in the world could you enjoy something like this?”

Keith laughed. “When a beautiful woman is squirming around on top of me, trust me, I enjoy it.”

She felt her cheeks flush and looked at the floor. Damn him, anyway. Always about sex.

Putting his fingers beneath her chin, Keith said, “It was a compliment. Don’t be embarrassed.” He told her that he’d be back and wandered off for another scotch.

People began milling around, and a series of speculations followed.

The woman beside her said, “I saw two guys run after that fellow who burst through here earlier.”

“Oh, hell!” A man’s gruff voice came from behind. “He didn’t do it.”

“No,” another man’s voice, more nasal-like added. “It was just Irene Kingsman again. Shot at Fred’s ass for picking up another starlet, no doubt.”

Laughter followed.

“Not as if her little derringer could do him much harm.”

Derringer? Rene frowned. A derringer only had two bullets, and she was certain she heard three. Her mind darted back to Rancey and the two men chasing him. Her flash may have saved her life, or least prevented her from a bullet hole, but it hadn’t included any faces, nothing recognizable, anyway. Everything happened too fast. Maybe it wasn’t a derringer.

Soon, a battalion of police officers showed up. They started swarming the building with the security guards. Some were detectives. Others were in uniform. All of them had their guns out with their fingers tapping the handles in a nervous energy that only comes from volatile, unknown situations.

“Did you see anything, anything at all?” a detective with a small mole on his sharp nose asked.

Rene thought about Rancey. Should she tell the detective? What could she tell him? Hello, my father’s in the Mafia, and I have an FBI agent blackmailing me, and I think I saw him running through here just a minute ago? “No, nothing, sir. I’m sorry.”

The detective then turned to Keith. “And you?”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Keith motioned to Rene. “Would you see anything if you had a woman like this lying on top of you?”

The detective chuckled, shoved his pencil behind his ear, and walked on to the next group of people. Keith flagged down another scotch. Everyone was on the verge of drunk, if not wasted. The waiters were running around with over-laden or empty drink trays, depending on whether they were on their way to or coming from the bar. No one seemed to care what type of drink they grabbed, as long as they had one.

Rene was glad, when an hour later, the police let everyone go, even though the ride back seemed to take forever.

“Come on,” Keith pleaded with her, pulling her against him in the back seat of the limousine. “You know you want to kiss me again.”

She shoved away. “Yeah, right, North. You’ve gotta earn another kiss from me if you’re gonna get one.”

“Well, you did feel me up.”

She laughed. “Only out of necessity, pal.”

“Okay, okay.” He waved a drunken finger at her. “Tomorrow. We’ll do it tomorrow.”

Not if I have anything to say about it, Rene thought. Her mind played across why she’d gotten the flashes, the pictures, about the shooting. Was it to protect Keith? Or herself? Hard to tell, but she wasn’t sure she wanted to get involved enough with Keith to find out. She didn’t need another Buddy on her hands. Plus, she didn’t need Keith asking questions about why she knew things ahead of time. Tonight, he was too drunk to figure it out. Tomorrow might be a different story.

Back at the house, she managed to get Keith upstairs to his bedroom with the help of the driver. Rene thanked him several times and tried to hand him a fifty, but he waved her off.

“Part of the job, ma’am.”

She didn’t like the sound of that. Part of the job meant it was a frequent occurrence. But she didn’t have much time to think about it before Keith grabbed her arm and tried to pull her on top of him.

His speech was slurred. “You know I love you.”

Rene laughed and pushed him away. “You love the whole world at the moment.”

“You’re funny.”

“That’s me, a laugh a minute.”

Keith stared at her a second and started to say something, but swayed and fell back on the bed.

Well, he’s out. Rene bent over, no easy feat in her gown, and pulled off his shoes. She pulled him forward and tugged his tuxedo coat and his tie off. His wing collar shirt and pants would just have to stay on. There was no way she could lift him enough to get the shirt off, and she wasn’t touching the pants. Maybe he’d wake up and deal with them later. If not, she hoped he had a good dry cleaner.

For a moment, she stood with her arms folded across her stomach and looked at him. Then, she sighed, turned the lights off, and went down the hallway to her room. Tonight sure

had turned out to be something to remember, even though she hadn't thought it would. She picked up the telephone and tapped out the private number for J.S. at the ranch. The telephone rang a dozen or so times before J.S. came on the line.

"Hello?" His voice sounded sleep-ridden.

"Putz," she said.

"Huh?"

"You heard me. You're a putz!"

"Rene?"

"Yes, it's Rene. Who else do you think would be calling you at 5:00 a.m. to tell you that you're a putz."

"Okay." He sounded a little more awake now. "So you wanna tell me why you're calling me a putz, or are you just gonna keep it a secret?"

Rene told him about the evening, about the shooting, about Andrea, and about Keith's drinking and his disappearance to snort a line.

J.S. said exactly what she didn't want to hear. "Figures."

She couldn't believe it. "What do you mean it figures?"

"Keith."

"You mean you knew he had a problem with this stuff?"

Dead air.

She sighed.

"Sorry, kiddo."

It unnerved Rene that J.S. used a term he'd always used when apologizing for Buddy's behavior.

"I suppose I should've warned you," J.S. said.

"Yes, you should've. Now I've got a mess on my hands, and you're gonna be forever known as putz boy."

Rene could hear him laughing as she hung up. She knew he'd probably sit there afterwards and worry once he got over his laughing fit, but she didn't care. J.S. knew how she felt about getting involved with men bent on leading self-destructive lives.

The bed felt soft against her bottom. For a while, she sat there, thinking about how she might handle Keith the next morning. Normally, she liked to take a hot bath before bedtime. It helped her relax. But tonight she didn't feel as though she had the energy, so she decided to heck with it, took her gown off, and hung it up before throwing on her nightgown and climbing under the sheets. She loved the way silk felt against her skin, like lapping water.

Her mind kept drifting, riddled with images of bullets and car crashes. She saw the Deuce. Not Sweet Baby, but Buddy's car, sprinting up Bent Road and across the I-71 overpass. She wasn't with him, but she could still taste the tartness of the whiskey he'd been drinking. The steering wheel tugged against her hands, and empty bottles rolled around her feet. Everything kicked into 2x slow frame, just like it had at the gala. The car leapt the road and slammed through the grass on the other side. The crash felt like a hard fist to the chest. She was rattled but still breathing when she looked up through the fractured windshield and saw the electrical transformer swaying back and forth, snapping its lines. She struggled. She couldn't move. All she could do was watch the transformer spin downward.

"Hey." Keith's voice awakened her.

Rene looked at the clock and stuffed the pillow under her arm. "It's only 9:00 a.m."

Climbing into the bed beside her, he put his arm around her waist and hugged her body against him. She thought about protesting, but she was too tired, and the heat of his bare chest felt good against her back.

"Sorry about last night," he said softly.

"Umm, okay," was all she could manage before sleep overtook her.

When she came to again, she could feel Keith's finger against her nipple. Both of her nipples were hard, straining against her nightgown for attention. She opened her eyes long enough to look at the clock. 12:05 p.m. Their flight was scheduled to leave at 4:30 p.m..

She thought about moving, pushing Keith away, but he was being so gentle and casual about it that she wondered if he was even awake. His arm was flung over her as if he'd rolled on his side and wrapped it around her out of instinct. His hand was barely inside her nightgown, which was opened wider because she was laying on her side with her arms pulled together. His index finger was only lightly touching her left nipple.

Awake or not, it didn't matter. He was driving her nuts. She slid his hand away. Keith clutched at her belly, pulling her tighter against him. His erection felt hot against her backside. It was get up or go off the deep end. She sat up.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"I—"

Keith pulled her back down. His mouth dropped to the edge of her nightgown and his hand slid inside, pulling her breast free.

Rene felt a sharp intake of breath as his mouth found her nipple. He suckled, nibbled, and toyed with it before moving to the other. But when his hand slipped inside the edge of her panties, she pushed at him.

"No." No sex. She wasn't sure she was ready for that. She wasn't even sure if she'd ever be ready for that with Keith.

Keith pulled his hand away. His mouth let go of her nipple with a quiet plop. "Don't worry, I'm not going anywhere you don't want me to go."

She relaxed a little as Keith's mouth traveled along her throat, but she still felt nervous flutter in her chest. Opening the doorway by kissing him in the pool had been a mistake. Opening another doorway by letting him lie in her bed and have his way had been two other mistakes. She shouldn't have done any of it, but she felt her tongue dart across her lips. She wanted to kiss him more.

His mouth traveled back up to her earlobe. He said softly, "How about if we just make out and you tell me where the boundaries are."

"No sex," she said.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning no sex."

His eyebrow shot up and the corner of his mouth curved into an impish smile. "I hate to be the one to tell you, but what we're doing right now might be considered sex by some people."

Rene's thoughts raced. It was true. This was sex. Not full-blown sex, but enough to get her in trouble. Keith's mouth went to her nipples again, first one, then the other. He was using his tongue to tease his way right past her resistance.

No, she thought. “No intercourse,” she said. That should do it. If he realized he wasn’t going to get any satisfaction, and in fact, would only wind up teasing himself to the hilt, he’d forget about it. Not that she was sure she wanted him to, but at least she’d given off the right signals.

“No problem.” Keith tugged her nightgown up and started licking and biting at her stomach.

Rene felt her body quiver. Goose bumps struck her everywhere. Keith’s tongue and teeth felt like hot ice against her skin as he kissed and gently nipped his way down her stomach and across her thighs.

He shoved her panties aside. She started to pull away again, but he held firm, and she stopped struggling as his fingers came in contact with the spot—that breathless, drive-her-nuts spot. She knew pulling away wasn’t an option now. Her body had already given her away.

His breath felt hot. She gripped the pillow under her head with both hands and watched as his face buried between her thighs, leaving only his straw blonde hair and his hands in view. His tongue moved in slow practiced strokes that gave her legs a mind of their own. They wrapped around his shoulders and tugged him forward.

Pulling away, he brought both hands to the top of her panties and yanked them off. She started to squirm in protest, but he pushed her thighs apart and returned to the same place.

She felt herself melt. Right there on the Egyptian cotton sheets. She was a goner.

Grasping her hips firmly, he pulled her body downward, even closer to him. His tongue moved faster.

Oh, my God! She hadn’t felt something that good for what seemed like an eternity. Not since a couple of flings right after her divorce.

Her breathing turned heavy. A continuous in and out burden that erased her mind of everything but what was between her legs, begging for release.

One of Keith’s hands traveled to her breasts and played with the points of her nipples. It didn’t take long for her to break into an earth-shattering orgasm. Her fingers twined in his hair as she pulled him closer. Her body liquefied with panted breaths. His tongue wound down in long, satisfying strokes.

Keith looked up from between her thighs. He grinned at her with what could only be described as knowing sense of smugness. “Enough of an apology?”

Rene laughed. Her voice still felt as though it was stuck in her throat. “More than enough.”

Sitting up, she started to consider how she felt about returning the favor. But he relieved her from the decision, extracting himself from between her thighs and sauntering off to the bathroom.

Rene wondered how many movie stars would do that—pleasure a woman without wanting something in return. Or would he expect something in return?

Crap. She rolled over and pulled a pillow over her head. What a bad idea.

Chapter 16

Jake

Jake followed the two wolves. First, they led him around L.A., hanging around outside of North's house, whenever they weren't in motion. Then, they moved off to a Hollywood bash, which he wasn't privy to enter, but where they wound up chasing Rancey out the door into the hands of several security guards, who wrestled him to the ground. Whatever happened brought out more red and blue flashing lights than Jake had ever seen, and he'd seen plenty in his time.

Rancey flashed his badge, and the security guards released him. The two thugs took off in a black BMW, and Rancey jumped into a small, white Toyota and followed. Jake figured, what the hell, and followed Rancey.

The trio led him to Las Vegas and through the Pharaoh casino to the pool café. Somehow, the roles had reversed, and Rancey had become the hunter following the wolves. Jake wasn't sure how or why it happened, but he was interested in finding out.

The thugs watched Rancey's every move with quick backward glances and took paths through places they knew Rancey couldn't shoot. Always crowded. Always public. Not even a brief moment in a secluded area.

Entering the café reminded Jake of walking into a Egyptian harem with clay decks and urns stacked on pedestals. Bushes and trees surrounded an Olympic size pool. Men and women of all sizes were stretched out on lounges, well-oiled and in a scattered state of undress. Others sat at tables under palm shades with brass cups in their hands.

The two wolves positioned themselves in the far right corner of the café. Rancey dodged through the crowd and took a spot at the bar. The thugs flagged a waiter. Jake shoved his sunglasses on and pulled off his jacket and shirt. He picked up a hotel towel from a lounge and flung it over his arm. His pants looked out-of-place. But everybody was in an odd state of dress, so he figured it didn't matter.

"Can I borrow some of your lotion?" he asked a woman stretched out on a lounge.

She rolled over and looked at him. Her breasts pushed at her lime green two-piece like a pair of water balloons. She brushed a lock of wheat blonde hair from her face, and her eyes

raked him over. “Sure.” Her voice rolled out with a low New Orleans accent, as she dangled a tube of suntan lotion from her fingers. “Do you want me to rub it on for you?”

Jake glanced at Rancey and the two wolves. He had a clear view, so he sat down. “If you don’t mind.”

The woman squeezed some lotion on his back. “My name’s Ruth, although some people call me ruthless.”

Jake smiled. “Nice to meet you, Ruth, or ruthless. My name’s Fredrick.” He didn’t see any point in giving her his real name because he wasn’t sticking around. Besides, Rancey or the wolves might loop back and check it, and he wasn’t sure if he wanted the wolves to know who he was, if they didn’t already.

Ruth’s hands worked over his back and shoulders. His muscles started to relax, but his eyes stayed on Rancey, tracing his line of vision to a side table at the back of the bar.

“Here,” Jake said, turning so he could get a better look at who was at the table.

Ruth’s hands moved to his sides and across to his chest. Her fingers felt warm. The lotion cooled his skin against the sun. The men at the back table were laughing and lifting their brass cups as if they were toasting one another. Jake turned more.

Well, I’ll be. Gianto Matero and Frank Batose. He didn’t recognize the others, but Matero was the biggest mob boss in Detroit, and Batose was a fair shake in Vegas as well as Atlantic City. Matero was famous for hammering his way into the casino business. He had most of the casinos in Windsor tied up. Gar had butted heads with him on more than one occasion.

Jake felt Ruth’s hand dip into the top edge of his pants. Shit. She was giving him a hard-on. He reached down, touched her hand, and smiled at her. No point in making her feel rejected. She was a good-looking woman and nice enough to help him with his surveillance, even though she didn’t know it. “You know, you’re great, and if this was another time, we’d be finding a hotel room right about now, but unfortunately, I have something else I’m dealing with I can’t put on hold.”

Ruth pulled her hand away and shrugged. “You can’t blame me for trying, can you?”

Jake laughed. “I’m not.” He brushed a lock of hair from her face, touching her cheek, before he stood up. “Thanks for the lotion, and. . .the thought. It was damned tempting, very damned tempting.”

Ruth smiled, stretched out on the lounge, and waved goodbye to him as he moved through the pool area to the bar. Rancey, old boy, wolves or not, we're going to have a chat. Catching Rancey off guard might be the ticket to resolving his problem.

Jake slid onto the barstool behind Rancey's back. "Well, hello, Agent Rancey."

Rancey turned. Surprise flickered across his face for a second before he reverted to his usual smooth metal demeanor. "Mr. Batella, funny running into you. Are you here on business or pleasure?"

Jake flagged the bartender and ordered a beer. "Business. Definitely business. You?"

"A little of both."

Bullshit. "Odd, I didn't think the Bureau allowed you guys out for anything but business."

Rancey took a drink of his Coke. Jake wondered if it had anything stronger in it. Probably not if he'd shifted his surveillance to Matero and Batose.

"Are you extorting or enforcing today?" Jake asked.

"Sorry, I don't know what you mean."

"Funny. I heard you had something going on with Gianto."

Rancey didn't look up from his Coke. "Your sources are mistaken."

Jake took a long draw on his beer and tapped his fingers on the bar counter. "I suppose you won't mind me telling Gianto or Frank Batose you're following them then."

"Is he here?" Rancey turned and looked around the bar.

Jake played along. "Back northwest corner. Of course, we both know what you're up to, so here's the deal."

Rancey turned back around to face him. "I don't cut deals."

Jake laughed. "Sure you do. You always do, and we both know where not cutting one will get you."

"Is that a threat?"

"No. It's a fact."

"Well, I think we're at the end of our conversation." Rancey stood up.

Jake grabbed him by the arm and forced him back onto the barstool. Rancey wouldn't make a scene. It wouldn't be to his advantage if Matero or Batose saw him, and that's the exact card Jake intended to play. "I think you need to listen."

Rancey's face turned to marble even more, if such a thing was possible.

"Garth knows what you're up to. I have no trouble doing what needs to be done, but I think you'd be a lot further ahead to simply disappear before it comes to that. If I don't do it, somebody else will. Maybe even Gianto or one of his goons. Maybe Batose. I don't think that pair of thugs you were following were out to give you a birthday present, unless you count what happened at that big Hollywood bash."

Rancey's eyebrow shot up for a second before it popped firmly back into place.

Jake let go of Rancey's arm. He was pleased he startled Rancey, and Rancey didn't know he was following right along with the rest of the crowd. "You know Gianto and I get along pretty well. In fact, we're working out a deal for one of Garth's casinos. I wonder what he'd be willing to do to get that casino free and clear, or at least for a reasonable price." Jake took a drink of his beer. "I've heard he's a real killer when it comes to business."

Rancey leaned forward. "Look, you little two-bit shit, you don't have anything on me, and I'm not the least bit afraid of Garth Agite. He's just an old man doing business the old way, and nobody would care if he vanished."

Jake laughed. "That sounds like a threat. I would've thought better of you. But if we're going to the threat level, I'll be more than glad to tell Garth. I think he needs a good laugh, at least for the week. Next week he might think different. The thing to know here is Garth's not the least bit afraid of doing what needs to be done with either his daughter or you. He actually doesn't give a shit about anyone, and you, of all people, should know that."

"Well, Batella, here's what I know." Rancey's face was calm, but his voice was seething. "I know you won't take me out because it would bring more agents down on you than you could possibly handle, and your money would dry up, or it would at least wind up buried so deep you couldn't come out of the woodwork for a decade. I also know you won't take Rene Matio out. I know you're obsessed with her. Every woman you've ever thought about being with is her. And I know as long as you're involved nothing's going to happen. So maybe you need to give Garth a call and let him know you aren't capable of handling this, or maybe you

need to hand it off to one of your underlings if you want it finished, because otherwise, we both know it's not going to happen no matter how many games you play with me. I don't bluff."

Jake shrugged. Rancey got up from his barstool and disappeared through the crowd. Jake watched the two wolves jump up and follow, reversing the game once again, before he ordered another beer and considered his options.

Chapter 17

J.S.

J.S. sat at an old, roll-top desk, sifting through bills. The paperwork fell like wet snowflakes he couldn't shovel away fast enough. The utilities ran high, probably because the ranch house had thirteen rooms. It originally had six bedrooms, but Keith converted one to an office and another to an entertainment room complete with a projection television and enough movies to run a theater.

J.S. never could get used to having movies to watch whenever he wanted. VCRs didn't even exist when he went into prison. Or did they? He shook his head. Maybe people with money had them. No, he had money, more money than he knew what to do with. He sent some of it to his mother so she could take care of his sister and brothers. Suzie with her tight cornrow braids and lopsided smile, Johnnie and Jamia with their identical twin outfits and opposite personalities. He didn't want to see them living in shit holes. He never heard from any of them after he landed in prison.

Whatever. So many things changed while he sat on his dead ass from 1979 to 1989. What a waste. Well, maybe not. He at least learned something. Not what the so-called rehabilitation experts wanted, but still a valuable lesson.

You've gotta stick your feet out and jump down the rabbit hole. Yep, that's what he came away with. Take a risk, as long as it's legal.

He did, too. After he got out of prison, he chased Alice right down the old rabbit hole. It didn't do him any harm, either. He landed in a sweet, fluffy marshmallow life with a decent job that included a nice queen size bed, a private telephone, and a television he could watch all night if he wanted. It didn't mean much to some people, but to him, it meant everything.

J.S. smiled as he thought about what roles Rene and Keith might play in his little *Alice in Wonderland* world. Rene was Alice. Keith? Well, Keith was the King of Hearts. So, what did that make him? The Rabbit? Not in the beginning. Buddy was the Rabbit. But now? Yes, he had the feeling he was the Rabbit.

The tip of his pen made a hollow sound as he tapped it against the antique desktop. The heat of the brass lamp irritated his arm. Too many Rabbit thoughts. At least he felt better that

he wasn't the follower any more. Rene and Keith needed him. Probably more than they realized. Rene was afraid of closeness, and Keith was afraid of responsibility. J.S. didn't feel afraid of anything, not even prison.

Rene's fear of closeness was understandable. All anyone had to do was look at the men in her life. Her father kicked her out. Phil put her into crime. Buddy wound up dead. Jake was an asshole. And she married someone she didn't love.

J.S. thought about Rene's ex-husband. He didn't know the guy, but as far as he could tell, the guy was the closest thing to a sweet melon she'd ever gotten. Too bad she didn't love him. Maybe she should've stayed with him anyway. No, that wouldn't have been right. Rene needed someone she could love, not just depend on.

If there was anyone else, she never said, so they couldn't have meant much. She should try again. He surely would try to fall in love again, if he found a good woman.

The oak office chair creaked as he swiveled from side-to-side and stared out the window overlooking the fields. He needed to get back to the bills. Someone had to do it. Keith was too preoccupied.

J.S. shook his head. Keith was out-of-control. Hell, he'd been there himself. That's how he lost Betty.

Betty. The more he thought about her, the harder he swiveled. Her hair pinned back with a black plastic headband. Her curly naps fluffed out behind her ears. Her small waist flared out to a killer butt. How he'd felt the day he dropped onto his knee and asked her to marry him.

J.S. wondered where Betty was now. Probably married with a half-a-dozen kids. He couldn't blame her. Another trip down the hole. But that time he didn't jump. He fell headfirst, and wound up sitting square on the mushroom, drowning in drugs and alcohol, right along with the Caterpillar. What's worse, he dragged Rene right down the hole with him. Man, what a royal screw up.

He nearly lost Rene right along with Betty. He could still feel Rene's body shaking in his arms at Buddy's funeral. Rene needed him to be strong, to stand up and take charge for both of them, but he couldn't. No matter how much he wanted to. He just couldn't.

J.S. stopped swiveling and wiped at the corner of his eye. At least Rene stuck with him. If she hadn't, neither one of them would've made it through, and they'd still be lollygagging on that damned mushroom.

No point in remembering all that, though. He was doing fine. Now, he needed to figure out how to help Rene. And Keith, too, for giving him a break.

J.S. glanced at the clock. 5:36 p.m. He wondered how Keith and Rene were doing. It was dirty not telling Rene about Keith's problems, but he wanted them to get to know one another first. They needed to if they were going to feel like family. That's what they all needed. A family. Even if he found a woman and started another, Rene and Keith would still be a part of it—the aunt and uncle for his children. The thought of it made the corners of his lips turn up and his eyes pinch with happiness as he picked up the telephone and tapped out the number he'd memorized. Time to talk with the private investigator he found and see what he could find out about Betty.

Chapter 18

Rene and Keith

Rene shifted in the padded vinyl seat beside Keith. She took a deep breath and looked out the window at the snow-laden clouds. The thought of what Keith did in the bedroom earlier troubled her. Thank heavens the flight back to Missoula was short. In L.A., she had packing to do and a plane to catch. But stuck inside the Boeing, she felt awkward, like she needed to say something.

She wanted to say letting him please her was a mistake, that she wasn't ready, even if it hadn't amounted to full-blown, intercourse-type sex. But she didn't. She wasn't sure if she needed to say anything.

Keith's ex-fiancée said he dated hundreds of women. He certainly had enough groupies. Maybe the bedroom incident didn't mean anything to him—just a handshake. Well, probably more than a handshake, but nothing serious.

Rene glanced at him. He was flipping through a magazine he picked up while they were waiting for the plane. His face looked relaxed, his lips pliant, kissable. She shook her head. She needed to stop thinking that way.

The attendant walked from the cabin to the front row and handed a balding man, whose ears stuck out at odd angles, a drink. He slurred out, "You're a sweetheart, baby." A woman in a prim business suit across the aisle held up a finger. The attendant moved down the aisle in the same practiced motion. Her head cocked sideways and listened to the woman before popping open the overhead bin and pulling out a stack of blankets. The woman said, "Thank you very much." The attendant moved on, passing the blankets out to other passengers.

Rene took one and wrapped it around her. It felt soft and smelled like Chantilly. She closed her eyes. Her thoughts floated back to what happened the night before, Agent Rancey and the two men chasing him. Was Rancey shooting at her? Was it a warning? Did something happen to make him think about getting rid of her? Or was he protecting her from the two guys?

Jake's appearance in Whitefish made it clear her father knew about her involvement with the FBI. But why should it bother him? She didn't know anything about her father's business.

All he had to do was prevent her from coming back into his life, and she never would know. It wasn't like he wanted her around. Seventeen years and nothing. Not a word. Not even through her mother's Sunday check-in calls. So, why not go back to Ohio and keep her end of the bargain with Rancey? It wasn't like she would get anywhere.

Something brushed the side of her face. Rene eyes opened to see Keith's fingers gently moving a strand of hair over her shoulder. His liquid blue eyes met hers. She felt a lump form in the pit of her stomach. Time to lighten the mood.

"Okay, bub. Here you are, pushing my hair back, after all those years of my father telling me I should quit doing that because it made me look like a boy."

Keith leaned over the console. His lips brushed her earlobe. "Trust me. You're definitely not a boy."

Shivers coursed over her body. Her cheeks heated, and she pulled her eyes away from him. She felt his fingers tracing the goose bumps on her arm. Well, that didn't work right. She tugged the blanket over her arms and up to her chin. "It's cold in here."

"Something to drink?" the flight attendant asked.

"No, thanks," Keith said.

Rene sat up in her seat. "Yes, hot tea, please."

The attendant started to move away, but Keith spoke. "Wait a minute. I'll take the same."

An auburn eyebrow shot up on the attendant. She stood there a second, blinking, before she turned and went to the front cabin with a swish of polyester.

Rene felt her lips part as she stared at Keith.

"What?" Keith asked.

"Nothing." She looked away and pulled *Flight News* from the seat pocket in front of her. Her thumbs started ruffling the pages. At least the airlines had changed issues.

The flight attendant returned, passing out the tea.

"Thanks" Rene took the cup and sipped the hot mixture while she contemplated Keith's switch away from scotch. Was he hung over? Or going for sobriety?

Keith took a sip and placed the mug on the console between them. "I've been meaning to ask you something."

Crap. Her body stiffened. She didn't want to discuss what happened earlier, but she didn't think she had much choice. "Okay."

"How did you know there was going to be a shooting?"

Oh, that. She shifted in her seat so she could look at him. At least she knew how to handle questions about her flashes. "I'm psychic."

"Excuse me?"

Rene tightened her mouth and nodded. "Yep, I see things before they happen."

"You're serious, aren't you?"

Rene grinned when she realized J.S. hadn't told him. "What do you think?"

"Okay, Ms. Smart Aleck. I get the point."

"What's that?"

"You aren't going to tell me."

She shrugged. "There's nothing else to tell."

Keith picked up his mug and sipped his tea, giving her periodic glances. Rene picked up her own mug, sipped, set it down and covered up. The blanket felt warm. Her thoughts calmed and she drifted into a light sleep. The next thing she felt was Keith touching her arm.

"We're here," he said.

They disembarked the plane and, in the terminal, Keith stopped at the restroom, while Rene moved through the crowd to the baggage claim. The areas smelled of wet tennis shoes. Her flowered bag hit the belt with a thud. As she bent over to grab it, Keith's arm snaked around her and scooped it up.

Rene turned. Keith's body was pressed against hers, forcing the backs of her knees against the conveyor belt. Her eyes met his lips. She chewed at the bottom corner of her lip before she looked at him. He grinned.

Her cheeks flushed. She glanced away. A reporter stood in the background with a camera attached to his eye like a protrusion. She slid around Kieth. He started to follow, but a woman stepped in his path, and the reporter snapped a picture.

"Could you sign my flight stub?" the woman asked

Rene moved toward the exit. There, she placed her luggage down and watched what reminded her of an invasion of locusts. People swarmed from every direction. They pulled out

pieces of paper and held their hands in the air, wing-flapping for Keith's attention. Some waited patiently. Others pushed their way forward. A few shrieked.

Keith looked at her between autographs. She smiled, picked up her luggage, and moved to a bench. No point in making him rush. She didn't mind waiting. At least Keith's fans were devoted. They seemed to love the way he treated them. She liked it, too. Personal, attentive, the way a person should treat his customers. But the constant attention made his life hectic. Not to mention the way women reacted to him.

Rene crossed her legs and thought about Buddy, how he was the same with women. He tried to stay faithful at times, and at others, he didn't. At first, his behavior bothered her. Later, it didn't bother her as much as it should've. In fact, she felt relieved when they weren't together. No pictures flashing through her head. Nothing to save him from.

Understanding his sadness didn't make watching him fall apart any easier. No matter how many times she saw pictures in her head of his mother lying in a pool of her own blood with her brains splattered up the wall behind her, Rene couldn't get used to the sight. Nor could she get used to seeing how everything played out afterwards—the self-blame, the continual self-destruction.

Rene shook her head. She needed to quit thinking about Buddy's death. Everything was so long ago. Seeing Keith didn't help, though. All she had to do was look at him, and her mind dipped into the past so hard she wondered if she could pull out again.

Keith waved to the balance of the people around him, apologized, and excused himself. As he neared, he reached for her, but she pulled away and picked up her bag.

"Fans," he said. "Ya' gotta love 'em, but at times they can be—"

"A royal pain in the ass?"

He laughed. "Yes, I know. Such a dreary life I lead."

They took the shuttle to the long-term parking. Rene wondered why he booked their return flight into Missoula rather than Kalispell. Three hours seemed like a long drive home compared to the half hour from Kalispell. Plus, why not have J.S. do the drop off and pick up rather than leaving the Bronco parked? It didn't make sense, but she figured she couldn't complain. It was his drive, and she had the time, so she might as well settle in and enjoy the scenery.

Keith maneuvered through the airport traffic and up the ramp leading to Route 93. They whizzed farther away from the city. The traffic thinned, and the houses grew sparse.

“So, did you have a good time?” Keith asked. His fingers moved to the temperature controls on the heater. “Or was it just another boring day in the life?”

Rene laughed. “I’d scarcely call getting shot at another boring day in the life.”

“True. I suppose I’ve just gotten used to it.”

Rene didn’t know why she mentioned the shooting. Keith continued to talk for a few minutes about all of the events he’d seen in the past, the weird acts of jealousy, but she didn’t want to think about it any more. Every time she thought she had a solid grasp on what happened, the idea got run over by a piece of reality. One angry wife with a derringer couldn’t have been responsible for all three shots fired.

The radio blared country music. Oh, good grief. She fiddled with the dials until she found a 70s rock station, tugged her t-shirt down, and adjusted the waist of her jeans. She then propped her feet on the dash and leaned back in the seat. Okay, that’s better.

Listening, her thoughts drifted back to the airport terminal and why she started thinking about Buddy. It was more than her worry about the women. Sure, the women might affect any relationship Keith might want to have. Especially with so many of them who seemed willing to drop their pants for a touch of fame. But there was more to her reluctance than women.

Even the thought of getting flashes from Keith wasn’t the problem. The only ones she got thus far were at the gala, and she wasn’t sure if those were related to Keith or her own self-protection. Her involvement with Rancey and how their deal might play out was also a detriment. She might wind up back in Ohio. Or she might wind up dead.

Keith’s drinking was another problem. Not to mention the coke. Keith didn’t seem bent on offing himself. But Buddy didn’t seem to be in the beginning, either; he just covered his depression with drugs and alcohol until he didn’t care.

The music erased the silence. The Rockies thrust upward into the sky like gray wedges with icing drizzled down the sides. The fields rolled out in white blankets of thick snow. The roads were clear. No ice, just a wisp of flurries. The Bronco handled the tugs of wind with ease. It was made for snow, rough terrain driving, and farm work, even though people in Los Angeles were using them for freeway driving.

What a waste of good horsepower, Keith thought. He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel before he glanced at Rene. Her eyes were closed, but her forehead was creased as though she had something serious on her mind.

“What in the world got into you, anyway?” she asked, her eyes now upon him.

“What?”

“Andrea.”

Keith detected a slight huff in Rene’s voice, but he felt relieved because he thought. . well, he wasn’t quite sure what he thought, but he didn’t think she was talking about Andrea. “Oh.”

“You should consider yourself lucky she dumped you. She was completely wrong, not your type at all.”

“Not my type?”

“Definitely not your type.”

“What do you think my type is?”

Rene shrugged. “I dunno. Definitely not the bitchy type, though.”

Keith laughed. It felt good to laugh about Andrea and everything he went through with her. He recalled a time when he punched a few people in the face just for mentioning her name. It was good to get Andrea off his chest, even though Rene asking about her made him wonder if Rene was jealous. If Andrea made her jealous, what did she think about his female fans?

Fans were a problem for an actor, or anyone famous, involved in a relationship. It was bad enough to have your life, your mistakes, exposed to the public. His pals, all celebrities in one form or another, with the exception of J.S. and maybe a couple of school chums, talked about it. Women they wanted to get involved with who passed them by because they didn’t like the idea of getting snapped up in the press. Women they didn’t want to get involved with throwing themselves at their feet. And of course, the obvious, women available for sex whenever an otherwise good relationship hit a bump.

Dealing with tiffs that naturally arose was difficult enough. Not to mention how complicated the guilt of infidelity felt, or the misery of a partner learning about such an act, or

worse yet, walking in on a quick blowjob or a tumble in the sack. Even if the slip was of no consequence, the relationship tumbled even farther into the abyss until it dissipated altogether.

Rene shifted in the seat beside him so her back was against the door. “Did you get a chance to look at the papers after the wingding?”

The wingding? Keith smiled. “No, I didn’t, I tend to ignore the press when I think it’s bad news.”

“Well, you should’ve. They had a great big picture of your ex looking like this.” Rene put her hands up in claw-like fashion with a crazed look in her eyes.

Keith laughed. Rene didn’t seem jealous. She seemed more like she was just poking fun at the situation.

“Definitely, a Godzilla,” she said.

“And the shooting?”

“Yeah, plenty of stuff about that.”

“I would imagine.”

Keith still found it puzzling as to why someone would shoot up a Hollywood party. Sure, there were more than enough nut jobs floating around, but to shoot a gun in such a public place, with dozens of security guards floating about? That just didn’t make sense, even for a nut job. John Hinckley did it, though. Mark Chapman, too.

“Think we’re going to get any more snow tonight?” Rene asked.

“Maybe.” Keith looked through the windshield at the gray clouds hanging over the mountains. Snow was one of the reasons he loved the mountains. It made him feel warm, even though he knew it made most other people feel cold.

“We didn’t turn out looking too bad, though.”

What? Keith realized Rene switched subjects on him again. He liked the way she batted around from subject to subject like a good hockey match. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Our picture, in the papers. We looked pretty darned good if you ask me.”

Keith smiled. “Well, I’m asking you.”

“You were waving your glass of scotch in the air like you were making a toast, and I was there beside you, smiling.”

“Did you look good in your gown?”

“Without a doubt.”

They laughed and started talking about the way she acted at the nightclub. The break in his thinking was a relief. He didn't want to consider all the reasons Rene might not want to be with him or how things turned out at the gala. He preferred teasing her about sitting on his lap, and how he thought she was using her breasts as weapons to put his eyes out.

“Not that I would've minded,” he told her.

“I'll bet, but could you imagine the headlines?” She held her hands up, marking off a rectangle. “Movie star, Keith North, injured in a freak breast attack at...what was the name of the place?”

“The Outrigger.”

“Ah, yes, injured in a freak breast attack at the Outrigger.”

Keith laughed. He loved talking with her. She didn't mind laughing at her own mistakes, and she had such a quirky sense of humor. He wondered what it would be like having her around more often, so much so he felt his chest tighten when he pulled up to her apartment above the shop.

Ask me up, he mentally commanded her.

But she didn't. She fiddled with her seat belt clasp.

What the hell. He reached out, grabbed her, and pulled her to him. Her eyes widened, but he didn't stop. His mouth found hers and lingered across her lips in a soft, delicate, unassuming manner. She returned his kiss, her mouth demanding, passionate.

The response gave his body a mind of its own. It wanted her. He wanted her. He wanted her earlier. It took every bit of restraint he had to keep from taking her. But he knew better.

Ask me up, Keith mentally commanded her again.

Her lips pulled away and brushed against his ear. “Kissing you is a really bad habit, you know.”

Keith started to say something, but the Bronco door popped open and she climbed out, grabbed her luggage from the back seat, and disappeared up the staircase to her apartment before he could even get the words formed.

Shit! He felt like a wet puppy, a school kid. He wanted to follow her, tell her that she shouldn't walk away like that. But he couldn't. No, he wouldn't. She irritated him. No, more

frustrated than irritated, but he couldn't decide whether he liked it or hated it since it left him with the sense of excitement, along with the obvious discomfort raging between his thighs. He only knew he wanted her, and if he was going to have her, it would require time. And patience. Two things he didn't know if he could give her.

Chapter 19

J.S.

The bar stool wobbled beneath the weight of J.S.'s body. Feet planted on the floor, he kicked at the sawdust. He never understood the point in tossing wood chips around. Must be some redneck thing. The jukebox clicked on and blared a honky-tonk tune. Two couples laughed and twirled on the dance floor, their boots clicking in a quick two-step.

"What did you wanna talk with me about?" J.S. asked.

Jake turned on the bar stool, and hugged at the sleeves of his suit. "That anyway to treat an old friend?"

Old friend, my ass. "I don't have much time, so get to the point, Batella." J.S. dragged a basket of peanuts sitting on the counter toward him.

Jake waved the bartender to get him a fresh draft. "Just thought I'd apologize for the way I acted the other night."

"Okay. No big deal." J.S. pulled a handful of peanuts out of the basket and stood, ready to leave.

"Do you have any idea how Rene sprung you?"

"Don't know. Didn't ask."

Jake looked at him for a minute before taking a draw on his beer. "She cut a deal with the FBI to get you out."

"So?" J.S. heard himself asking, even though he was certain he already knew the answer.

"So, the deal's going to get her in trouble."

"She can handle it. If not, I'll handle it for her."

Jake's eyes narrowed and his jaw took on a firm set while he tapped his index finger on the counter. J.S. understood the level of intimidation behind the act. He shoved the peanuts in his pocket.

Screw you, Batella. Jake didn't have anything he hadn't dealt with in prison.

"I'm sure she can," Jake said. "I'm even sure you can, but I'm not so sure about North. Think he can handle it?"

“Yeah, he could.” J.S. didn’t want to choke, but what he just said was a lie. Keith wasn’t Buddy. He might look like him. He might sound like him. He might even act like him at times. But Keith was no Buddy, and he probably couldn’t handle someone like Jake, let alone Phil Matio.

“How’s Phil doing, anyway?”

“Dead,” Jake responded. His voice didn’t miss a beat. “Rene didn’t tell you?”

“No.” Why didn’t she?

“Doesn’t matter. You know who’s in charge now?”

J.S. thought a moment. It sure as hell wasn’t Jake, or Jake wouldn’t be playing message boy. He doubted it was Phil’s daughter, Catherine. Even if they let a woman step up to the desk, Catherine wouldn’t accept. She hated the business, and she sure as hell wouldn’t put Rene in a bad situation.

Quit fussing over the particulars. “So what’s your point?”

Jake sat his drink on the counter and motioned for a refill. “The point is Rene’s father doesn’t like Rene running around with North. Or for that matter, he doesn’t like her running around with you.”

J.S. didn’t want to laugh, but his hand slapped the tavern counter, and he laughed so hard he thought he was going to pee all over the floor.

“You think that’s funny?”

Sitting back down, J.S. motioned the bartender for a beer. “Yeah, I think that’s pretty damned funny.”

Jake shrugged.

The laughter was gone. J.S. wiped his mouth on his shirtsleeve. Garth Agite wasn’t the type to send somebody, let alone Jake, who both J.S. and Rene knew to be the biggest liar coming and going, clear out to Montana just to tell Rene he didn’t want her hanging out with Keith or himself. Even if Gar had wanted it or thought it, Gar would know better. It didn’t work with Rene when she was a teenager. It sure as hell wouldn’t work now. Rene would just tell him to screw off, the same as she did seventeen years ago.

“How about cutting the bullshit and telling me the truth?”

“Okay,” Jake said. “It’s like this. Gar doesn’t know what kind of deal Rene cut with the Bureau to get you out, but he knows she did. My time here says it was to take both Gar and me out, fold up the business.”

Okay, makes sense. J.S. couldn’t picture Rene turning hit woman, or the Bureau asking her to do something like that, but he could picture the Bureau asking her to tighten a bolt to make their job easier.

“It’s not gonna happen, though.” Jake picked up his beer again and took a long draw. “If Rene thinks she can use some old piece of information on us, or she tries coming back to Ohio to dig something up, Gar will make her life miserable. You. Keith. It doesn’t matter. Gar’s a lot bigger than you think, than anybody thought. And he isn’t going out without a fight.”

The more Jake talked and J.S. listened, the more J.S. felt the real problem was Rancey. Having an agent stick to them like grease to a french fry wasn’t anything new. Before Rancey, it was Ralph. J.S. wasn’t surprised to hear old Ralph kicked the can and someone else took his place, though. Ralph was older than an Indian relic when he came to the prison back in 1979. The visit still rattled in J.S.’s head.

“Look, it’s simple,” Ralph had told him. “You tell me something I can use, and I’ll testify at your parole hearing.”

“You gotta be some kind of stupid,” J.S. said.

Other people in the prison visiting room turned to stare at them, but J.S. waved them away. Everybody but Andre, who put on his cellmate what-the-hell face. Visitors started talking again, and the room quit echoing.

Ralph sat with his hands folded in his lap, his cheeks loose, not a speck of anger showing. “No, I’m not, and I don’t think you’re stupid, either. Do you really think Phil Matio gives a shit about you? Do you really think either one of your partners gives a shit about you?”

J.S. shrugged. He didn’t care about Jake or Phil.

“All you gotta do is tell us exactly how Matio gets his stuff across state lines and where it goes from there.”

“What stuff?” J.S. blinked his surprised look face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. The gig that stuffed me here in the box was just a one-time deal. You know, a stupid-ass thing to do.”

Anybody with even a piss-ant of a brain knew you didn't cross people who paid your way for seven years. It didn't matter if they were criminals. It didn't even matter if they didn't give a shit. Rene took care of him, and Phil took care of him in his own way.

J.S. didn't hurt for much. Prison ate at him at first, but after the first two years, he got used to the idea. After five years, he actually came to accept the place. The old saying about a cot and three hots pretty much fit the situation. He could do it again if he had to. He just didn't want to. Life with Keith was good. Being around Rene was better.

J.S. watched Jake tap his fingers on the bar counter. The jukebox kicked on another tune.

"What do you want me to do about all of this?" J.S. asked.

"I don't know," Jake said. "You tell me."

J.S. took the last drink of his beer. "I could let them send me back to prison so Rene could cancel the deal."

"You think that'll take care of it?"

J.S. turned his empty draft glass in his hands. The music stopped. Ice clinked against glass as the bartender went down the counter checking drink levels.

"No, probably not." J.S. understood what Jake had in mind. It didn't take more than a third grade education to figure out. Jake wanted him to kill Rancey. If he did it and wasn't caught, no harm done. Even if he did and got caught, still no harm done as far as Jake, Rene or Keith were concerned.

Jake said, "Maybe Virginia here could give you a little hand with the subject."

J.S. looked up. Virginia stood beside Jake, blinking, with a crooked oh-my-gawd smile on her face.

"Hi, J.S." Virginia pushed her hair away from her eyes. Her cheeks flushed. "Funny running into you here. You don't usually come in here, do you? What have you been up to, anyway?"

"Not much," J.S. said. "Gotta go." He jumped up from the bar stool and headed for the door. The whole thing was turning into *As the World Turns*. How deep was Virginia in? He sure hoped Jake wasn't planning on setting up shop in Whitefish.

No sooner than his feet hit the sidewalk, a white Ford Taurus pulled up. The driver's side window came down.

“Get in,” his parole officer, Ken Darby, said. Darby’s face was redder than usual in the middle of his carrot hair. His blue eyes were bloodshot.

“What?” J.S. knew he sounded irritated. Darby was okay, but it bugged him how Darby kept popping up. How was he supposed to get on with his life if Darby wouldn’t leave him alone?

“I need to talk with you,” a deep, smooth voice came from the backseat.

J.S. jumped. He started to turn around.

“No, just keep your eyes on the windshield. It’s not important who I am. It’s only important for you to know I’m part of the FBI’s internal investigation unit.”

J.S. could smell pipe tobacco. Odd. Agents don’t normally smoke.

Darby turned down West Lakeshore Drive and started heading toward Whitefish Lake, the opposite direction from Keith’s ranch.

“I know why Jake Batella’s here,” the voice said. “I’m pretty much here for the same reason.”

Small droplets of rain hit the windshield. Darby reached down and flipped the switch on the defroster before moving his hand to the windshield wiper control and giving it a twist. The wipers flopped across the thick glass, smearing dust into mud.

“We have an agent out of control,” the man said.

No shit, J.S. thought.

“We don’t want him taken out, though. The Bureau doesn’t take kindly to thugs and ex-cons taking out an agent, even if the agent is. . .well, not acting in an appropriate manner.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Yes, you were. There’s no point in hiding it. We’ve known for quite some time what Garth Agite wants, and what Batella’s planning.”

A puff of smoke wafted across the seat. J.S. rubbed his nose. Smoke bothered him ever since he’d quit smoking in prison. No point. Cigarettes were too expensive, and he used the money Rene sent him for food, paper, pens, better stuff.

“Pull over,” the man said.

Darby found a small break along the edge of the road and eased the Taurus over. He started to turn the key in the ignition, but the man said, “No, leave it on and take a walk.”

Nodding, Darby pulled an umbrella from beneath the driver's seat and got out of the car. He paced to the front bumper and stared off in the distance.

J.S. could feel his breath faltering. He glanced up in the rear view mirror. Only a dark form appeared.

"It's like this, Seitz." The man said, emphasizing the last name J.S. forgot he had, except when prison guards, parole officers, FBI assholes, or some other kind of law enforcement reminded him. "We don't want Rancey doing anything stupid, or at least anything more stupid than he's already done. He's got a lot of people pissed off. Important people. Big people. It doesn't matter if they're mad at him, but it does matter if they're irked at the rest of the Bureau. We have agents in the field, working the same type of mob cases Rancey has worked for years, and these agents would be hard to recoup if we lost them. We don't need that kind of trouble."

"So what do you want from me?" J.S. watched his parole officer rub his hands together and blow on them. He wondered how much Darby knew.

"You might be able to do us a favor. Help us scare Rancey a little until we can rein him in."

"Scare?"

"Let me explain," the man said.

Chapter 20

Jake

Jake kicked at the snow scattered around the tree beside him and shoved his fists into his pockets. It was already late November, and he couldn't keep handling the business by telephone or the occasional flight out. Even if things were running smoothly, the profits weren't increasing, and Gar expected better. They needed to crank up the money if they were going to wrangle the other twenty percent of Unity stock Gar wanted.

Shit. He hated December. Rene. Rancey. Gar didn't care which, but one of them had to go before the end of the year. If not, Gar would send someone else to take care of the job, leaving Rene the obvious target. She was easier.

Cranking up the heat might make J.S. move a little faster. Manipulating him wasn't difficult. It was as sure as the 49ers winning the Super Bowl in 1990. But if J.S. fell through, the alternative was more complicated. Getting Matero to take out Rancey would cost, and Jake wasn't sure Gar would shoulder losing a Windsor casino, especially when handling Rene wouldn't cost a dime. Not to mention the problems offing an agent would create. The FBI couldn't walk away from it. They'd go full enforcement. Agents taking payoffs would stop. Profits would shrivel. Not just for Gar, but for everyone.

Jake tilted his head back. He stared up the skirt of a towering evergreen. Clumps of snow rested across on the branches. They looked like sleeping animals. Small bobcats.

A sound, almost, but not quite, like a woman's hair shifting in the breeze surrounded him. Funny, he never thought falling snow had a sound.

Virginia came up beside him and spun around, her arms and tongue sticking out, her head thrown back. "I love the taste of fresh snow."

Jake smiled. He picked a piece from the snowsuit Virginia gave him. She was right. It put a delicate cold sizzle on his tongue. He hadn't realized how pleasant hiking could be. There weren't any trails in Cleveland, or none that he knew of.

After a few spins, Virginia stopped and grasped his arm. "I suppose you don't get much of this living in the city."

"We get lake-effect snow."

“Is the lake nice?”

“Not really. It was polluted until the 80s. Now, they’ve cleaned it up, but it’s still not good for much more than a boat ride.”

“You should try swimming in Whitefish Lake sometime. It’s great.” Virginia tugged at his arm, encouraging him to follow. “The water’s so clean. You can drink it, wash your hair in it, whatever you want. It’s cold, though. Even in the summer, it makes your skin turn blue.”

Jake wondered about that. Swimming wasn’t one of his strong points. It wasn’t that he didn’t know how. He did. His mother insisted he take swimming lessons until he hit middle school. She kept telling him, “You never know when you might wind up in a sink-or-swim situation, Jakie, and you gotta be prepared.” He felt himself grimace at the thought of the nickname his mother used, but he told Virginia, “Maybe I will. That is, if you promise to go with me.”

Virginia smiled, but glanced at the ground. Her modesty was cute. Some women used it to get what their way, or maybe something they wanted. Not Virginia. She seemed shy, even about her own shyness.

They made their way down the hill, along the mud path, toward the car. Virginia’s mitten-covered hand felt strong and comfortable in his own. Her boots picked their way along the slick surface in front of him. One of Jake’s boots hit a tree root protruding from the ground, and both began to skid out from under him.

“Oh!” Virginia grabbed his hand harder.

They both slid, feet first, down the trail, hitting the base on top of one another. Virginia laughed. Her freckles bunched across her nose in a family reunion. Her chest heaved hard.

Jake reached up and pulled her mouth to his. At first, her eyes widened, but he kept kissing her—soft, like he hadn’t kissed a woman in a long time—until her eyes closed, and she started returning his kisses. Her lips didn’t meet his own with the same forceful passion of women who wanted to bed him. They lingered, delicate.

His arm went around her waist and drew her closer. As he continued kissing her, he made certain one hand stayed on her hair, stroking and smoothing, and the other at her side, clutching. Virginia wasn’t the type he could grab and grind against his body. She tasted like

cinnamon. Her tongue made quick darts. He wanted to dip deeper into her mouth and suck up her taste, but he didn't.

Getting to know Virginia, and the time involved, was what attracted him. She was a challenge. No, he mentally corrected, challenge wasn't the right word. Virginia wasn't a conquest. She was more like a warm cup of cocoa, worth savoring.

Jake recalled how puzzled she'd looked when she'd walked up during his conversation with J.S. at the tavern two weeks ago. He hadn't expected her. They hadn't talked about meeting, but he played her confusion off by putting his arm around her and pulling her close. He brushed an unruly curl from her forehead. "Do you want to go over to my motel for a while?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"Okay." He let go of her and picked up his beer.

Virginia sat down beside him. "Look, Jake, I like you and everything. In fact, I like you a lot. But you're just here for a while, and I'm pretty much here forever, so having an affair with you just doesn't work for me, okay?"

Staring at his beer, he realized she was right. Small town life was a pain in the ass. He listened to what people said. They were downright mean-mouthed and squawked like a room full of parrots whenever they got together at the local diner. Did you hear? Did you see? Can you believe? Their pettiness annoyed him. "I understand," he said. "Can we just forget about it?"

Virginia's curls tumbled forward as she stared at the floor.

He brushed them away from her face. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have suggested it. Could we start over?"

She looked up and smiled. Taking her arm, he led her over to the pool table. They shot a few games before she tugged him out onto the dance floor. He could still remember how much she smelled like burning wood and felt firm, like a good pillow.

Falling in love was hard to swallow. He hadn't done it for a long time, not since Rene. He didn't even realize it was happening until that night at the bar when he walked her home and stood on her doorstep. People walked up and down the sidewalk in front of her apartment. And he let things go. He said goodnight without trying to kiss her or talk her into letting him come

up. Of course, kissing her now confirmed his feelings. He just had to figure out if he wanted them. He could walk away. It wasn't like he had to come back to Montana or see her ever again.

After a couple minutes, Virginia tugged away and smiled. "Maybe I need to take you hiking more often."

Jake brushed the hair from her forehead. "Maybe you should."

They made their way to Buffalo Clyde's for a cup of coffee. A slick, red booth was waiting for them. The waitress brought coffee in thick glass mugs. The vinyl felt warm against Jake's back. Virginia's eyes lit up with excitement as she talked about hiking the Lewis and Clark trail along the Bitterroot River.

"Do you do much hiking?" she asked.

Jake shook his head no. "My work usually takes up most of my time."

"You know, I've been meaning to ask you what you do for living."

Jake didn't say anything for a minute, but Virginia's auburn eyes stuck with him. "It's kind of hard to explain."

"I'm a good listener."

"Well, we own a lot of things—antique shops, casinos, and a couple movie studios."

"Movie studios?"

"Yeah, nothing you'd be interested in." Jake shrugged and looked at his coffee mug before he looked up again. "My boss is a little strange. They're mostly. . . you know, porn studios. Well, we also have a couple production companies and stock in one of the larger studios."

Virginia's eyebrows tightened.

"I don't run them. He has other people who take care of that part. I just manage the managers."

"Oh, I see. And the casinos?"

"Same thing. I don't run them directly, but I manage the bosses. I used to run two of the antique shops. Wasn't much money in it, though, and then Gar. . ."

"Gar?"

Had Rene mentioned her father to Virginia? Jake shifted to the corner of the booth and rested his arm along the table. “Garth Agite, the man who owns the business.”

“Oh, okay, sorry. Go ahead.”

Good. Rene hadn’t told her. “Well, Gar gave me a promotion and put me in charge of managing. Like a vice-president.”

“Like?”

Jake rubbed his forehead. It was more difficult to explain than he thought. He never explained what he did for a living before. Either the women knew and didn’t care, or he ignored their questions. With Virginia, neither would work. Not if he wanted to continue seeing her.

“We don’t use titles,” Jake said. “We just know each other by name.”

“Sounds informal. That must be pretty nice.”

Nice? “I suppose.”

“So how long have you been doing it?”

“Well, let’s see. I actually started under Rene’s father.”

“Rene’s father?”

“Her adoptive father.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. She doesn’t talk about her family. Not at all, so I figure it’s none of my business. Is that how you met her? Working for her adoptive father?”

“Yes, she hired me.” That worked. “Then, when he died, Gar bought the business out and took me along with it.”

“You must be a good worker.”

Jake shrugged. “Apparently.”

Virginia asked him a dozen or so more questions. He tried to answer in an honest, yet uninvolved, way, while watching her for any indication she knew too much.

After a while, she leaned back in the booth. “So is that it?”

“Pretty much. I know it’s difficult to understand.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Her head cocked to the side a little, her curls springing out, still damp from the snow. “Sounds like you’re working for the Mafia.”

Jake laughed. “The Mafia?”

Her mouth pinched and her eyes narrowed. Jake took another drink of coffee and tugged at the neck of his sweater. He wondered what the other guys told their wives. Shit. Now he was thinking of her in terms of a wife. It made him uncomfortable.

“That’s okay,” Virginia said. “You don’t need to tell me. I’ve done my share of dumb stuff. In fact, have you ever heard of Gianto Matero?”

Jake felt his eyebrows pop up.

“Yeah, I thought you might have.” Virginia set her cup on the table. It clattered against the plate. She yanked her curls back. “Well, at least we both have our secrets.”

Chapter 21

Rene

Rene pulled up in front of the ranch, and sat in the car, staring at the front door. The snow fell in wet flakes. Earlier, she spent fifteen minutes scraping the Deuce off. Soon, it would hit garage for the winter, and she would either have to buy a truck or give up driving altogether.

Before, she'd never had much reason to drive the winter. She didn't have anyone she wanted to visit—not anyone who lived outside of Whitefish city limits, at least not until J.S. moved to Montana and started working for Keith. She didn't need to worry about getting to work. She lived above her shop, and her suppliers delivered the stock she needed. The other places she went fell within walking distance. But now, with J.S. and Keith living several miles outside of town, not having a vehicle could be a disadvantage.

Oh well, it didn't matter. She still loved the snow, and how it fell to the ground like artwork, painting the world clean and giving everything a soft texture.

The heater was running full blast, blowing up the windshield and into her face. The air smelled dusty. Three weeks had passed since her and Keith's trip to Los Angeles. At first, she wanted him to call. Then, she was glad he didn't.

Crap. She felt like a school girl. No, if she were in school, things wouldn't be this complicated. Young. No baggage. No FBI. Still a mob father. But she didn't know about her father then. She tapped her hands on the steering wheel and stared at the front door.

Every time J.S. came by the shop, he asked her to the ranch for dinner. She wasn't sure if Keith prompted J.S. to make the invitation, or if J.S. was trying to push her and Keith together. But either way, she declined.

She needed to resolve the problem, though. Losing a friend over something this petty was asinine. She and J.S. went back seventeen years. If she couldn't work this situation out with Keith, she needed to find another way she and J.S. could remain friends.

Well, the door wasn't going to get any smaller. Rene took a deep breath, got out of the car, and walked up to the door. Her boots crunched against the frozen earth and clicked when she took the three steps to the landing. She tugged at the bottom of her fur-lined parka and

stared at the mat beneath her feet. Snow barnacles were sticking to her boots. She banged them against the doorframe before pressing the bell.

Nothing.

She stood a moment longer and pressed it again.

Still nothing.

Turning, she took one step off the cement porch step when the door flung open. Keith looked as though he were about to shout. His mouth opened a second until their eyes met, and a smile spread across his face. His jeans were unbuttoned, and his cotton shirt was open.

“Well, well,” he said. “See what the cold brought to my door.”

Rene wet her lips. Her eyes wandered down his chest and the light blonde hair, leading downward and looping around his belly button, before they darted back to his face. Keith was wearing the same grin he had in L.A. when he looked up from between her thighs. A burning sensation came to her cheeks. “Did I interrupt something?”

“Yeah, a shower.”

Her eyes went to his damp hair. “Should I come back later? Or are you going to let me in?”

“I dunno.” He leaned against the door casing and folded his arms across his chest.

“Seems like you treated me pretty bad.”

Rene kicked one boot and then the other against the concrete step, trying to muster some shame. “Dang, I knew I should’ve brought flowers, maybe some candy?”

“No, I’m not that sort of guy.”

She raised her eyebrows in mock surprise. “And what sort of guy’s that?”

“Easy.”

“Hmm. . .well, I hate to be the one to tell you, but we’ve already had sex, by the definition of some people.”

His head cocked sideways. “We have?”

“Uh huh.”

Keith laughed. “I suppose I’d better let you in then.”

He swung the door open. They talked a while before he asked her if she wanted to play pool. She agreed, but refused to make any more wagers.

“Nope, not gonna happen. You’re not gonna get me to another one of those Hollywood wingdings.”

“No?”

“It’ll be a while before I wanna take on another shoot-’em-up-fest or Godzilla again. I gotta brush up on my kung fu and cat fighting.”

He laughed.

Rene liked it when he laughed. “Besides, you’re a hustler.”

“Moi?”

“Yes, you, North.” She hung the cue back on the rack.

“Oh, and you aren’t?”

“Didn’t say I wasn’t.” Her eyes wandered down his chest. Ten minutes, and he hadn’t buttoned his shirt or his fly.

“See anything you like?”

Her eyes jerked up to meet his before she smiled. “I’m not sure.”

He came around the table to stand beside her. “I would say you’re interested, or you wouldn’t be here.”

She felt his body heat painting her. She stepped away and started pulling the balls from their pockets, setting up a new rack. “Well, looking and buying are two different things. Besides, I have a lot going on in my life. Things you probably wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

She laughed. “I already did.”

“You know what I mean.”

Keith’s blue eyes were dark, hurt even. She thought about telling him. How could she explain she was indebted to the FBI? That she had an agent ready to do whatever he could to send her to prison if she didn’t go through with her promise? That she had an ex-lover who was ready to kill her if she did go through with it? Knowing the truth and sharing it were two different animals. She felt so alone. “Yes, I know what you mean, and if things were different. . .”

Keith walked behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and finished setting up the rack. “If things were different, what would you do?”

“They aren’t.”

“Okay, but what if they were?”

Rene didn’t want to reject him. He was nice, and she was attracted to him. Plus, she didn’t want to create a gap that would separate her from J.S. and whoever J.S. wanted in his life. “I would probably ask you if you were interested in getting to know me.” She turned and placed her hands behind her on the edge of the table. Their bodies were nearly touching. “I’m not interested in a relationship with someone I don’t take a long time to get to know. Whereas, you seem like a person who likes to hurry and get your own way.”

“Yes, in most situations.”

Rene shrugged. “Well, there you go. Things wouldn’t work out between us in terms of a relationship, although I’m sure we could be friends.”

“And what if I wanted to take the time?”

“Oh, I don’t think you’d be interested. It could take six months, maybe a year, before I’d feel comfortable.” Her palms felt sweaty against the wooden side rails of the pool table. Her heart beat so hard against her chest she thought she might hyperventilate.

“A year without sex?”

“Not with me.” Even if he wanted to date her, maybe a no sex clause would let him find someone else, and she wouldn’t have to worry about having a relationship with him. They could be friends.

His eyebrow shot up. “You wouldn’t care if I were with someone else?”

Rene shrugged. “Why would I?”

“I see, and does this mean I can’t kiss you?”

Her mind raced over the question. If she said she didn’t want to kiss him, then he would realize she was rejecting, or at least trying to dissuade, him. What would it matter? She probably wouldn’t be around for a year, not with both Rancey and Jake after her. “Well, I suppose kissing wouldn’t hurt.”

The words barely left her mouth when he grabbed her. Their mouths crushed with such force she thought she was going to have an orgasm on the spot. Her arms moved around his neck, and her tongue dipped deep into his mouth. He lifted her onto the edge of the pool table. His hips pushed her knees apart, and their bodies pressed together again.

One final kiss, and she pushed him away. Her mind felt liquefied. She didn't think she'd been kissed like that since. . .well, since Buddy last kissed her.

Keith mouth parted as though he felt the same surprise. "Wow."

She laughed.

"Maybe I'll try it."

"What?"

His lips traveled up her neck to her earlobe. "Maybe I'll try this year you're talking about."

Well, that didn't turn out very good. Or did it? Rene's confusion stuck to her like a wet blanket as Keith's mouth fell to her lips again, and she struggled to free herself.

Chapter 22

J.S.

J.S. stood in line at the feed store, waiting to pay the monthly bill. The store was hot. The dust fuming down from the large overhead heaters smelled like wet animals, while smaller propane heaters spewing straight across made his shins itch. He looked around at the hundred pound bags of feed stacked in aisles like tired dogs sleeping on top of each other. Scoop bins of light feed were lined along the back with their mouths hanging open.

The man behind the counter pulled his reading glasses down to the tip of his nose and fingered the edges of the check. “Why ain’t Hank paying the bill?”

“He just isn’t.” J.S. tugged at the sleeves of his parka, pulling it off.

If truth were told, he couldn’t trust Hank. Too many discrepancies and too much money unaccounted for. Hank wound up in charge of the money after Keith let his accountant go. Why Keith made such a dumb ass move, J.S. wasn’t sure, but he had a feeling it was because money was running low, or at least low by Keith’s standards.

J.S. didn’t mind handling the ranch finances. At least they gave him a chance to use what he was learning through his correspondence course in bookkeeping. Debits, credits, expenses, accounts receivable and payable. They were constant, but manageable. Dollars and cents came easy. He just had to keep his hands on the invoices and make certain everything was riding on top.

The man pushed the sleeves of his blue flannel shirt to his elbows. “Well, is Hank coming in to pick up the feed order?”

“Yeah, he’ll be in later this afternoon.”

The sound of boots on cement came from the front of the store. J.S. listened as they approached and stopped. There was a hubcap mirror hanging from the top shelf behind the counter. J.S. glanced at the man, who was a good three or four inches shorter than him, and was standing with his back to the counter. The man pulled his hunting hat off. He had dark brown hair, clean, shiny, yet rumpled. J.S. wondered if it was Rancey, or maybe the shadow man from Darby’s car.

Ever since his meeting with Jake, and the shadow man afterwards, J.S. felt a constant tightness in his chest, like someone had lassoed him and tied him to a tree. He needed to do something. What? How? The second was as important as the first.

The man behind the counter scribbled his initials across the bottom of the receipt and his fat fingers adjusted the bill of his John Deer cap before handing J.S. the piece of paper. “Tell Hank we’ll be waiting for him.”

“Will do,” J.S. turned to leave, his eyes focused on the receipt, when he bumped into the man behind him.

“What the hell?” the man said.

J.S. looked up. It was Jake Batella. “Sorry. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Obviously.” Jake rubbed his shoulder where their bodies collided before he reached into his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. “Here. You might want this.”

J.S. took the piece of paper. *Ridge Motel, #5*, and a Missoula address were written in large block letters. Jake motioned J.S. to follow.

They made their way down the wide center aisle to the front of the store. Jake pointed to a green Jeep parked next to the pickup J.S. was driving before he shoved the door open. Cold air rushed forward like a fist to the stomach. J.S. pulled his parka on, and walked outside. He blew into his hands, wondering if his breath would form an icicle if it came straight out of his mouth.

The seats of the Jeep felt warm. Jake started the engine and fumbled with the heater. The hot air slapped J.S. in the face. Cold, hot, cold, hot. J.S. wasn’t sure he liked Montana winters. The snow was nice. The ice wasn’t.

Jake pulled a cigarette from a pack inside his parka, tapped it on the pack, and lit it. He took a long drag and flipped the ashes into the ashtray crammed full of bent up butts. “The address is where Rancey is staying at.”

“I figured.”

“There’s a little more to the situation now.”

J.S. didn’t say anything. He couldn’t imagine how things could get any worse, but every time a person thought something like that, things barreled down the hill like sledding on a trashcan lid.

“Gar’s about to take over Unity Studios.”

“So? What’s that got to do with shit on a stick?”

Jake chuckled. It was the kind of chuckle a man gives when he’s heard a “who’s on first” joke, but knows a better one. “Ever ask your boss who’s handled most of his films? What studio?”

“It’s none of my business.”

“None of your business? The guy writes your checks, and it’s none of your business? That’s a piss poor way of thinking. I know where my boss’s money comes from. I pay attention.”

“I’m not you.”

A fuzz of smoke came from Jake’s nostrils. “Well, that’s a fact.”

“What’s your point, Batella?”

“The point is Gar doesn’t want Rancey making trouble for him.”

“If Gar’s as big as you say he is, then I’m sure he could take care of it.”

“Why would he want to? You got any idea what might happen if we eliminated an agent?” Jake stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray. “Rancey works other. . . businesses, so they might not be sure who ordered the hit, we’re all connected, and we’d all suffer.”

J.S. snorted. “More like somebody else might get pissed off at Gar and decide he was the problem.”

Jake laughed. “Now you’re getting it.”

J.S. got it. If Gar ordered a hit on an agent, the FBI couldn’t let it go. If they did, agents everywhere would start winding up with bullet holes. Whether the agents were dirty or clean wouldn’t matter. They’d all become targets, so the FBI would have to find Rancey’s killer. They’d shake up crime from San Diego to Pittsburgh, probably even clear to New York City. Then, Gar wouldn’t have just have the FBI to worry about. He’d have half the thugs in the country after him. Nobody wanted their money to dry up.

“So what do you want me to do about it?” J.S. asked, although he already had a sinking feeling he knew.

“I want you to take care of Rancey.”

“What makes you think they wouldn’t connect me to Gar?”

“Think,” Jake said. “Why should they? You have a history of violence. It won’t look like anything out-of-the-ordinary. You should—”

“I don’t have to do shit.”

Jake tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “No, but I think you already know the consequences of not doing it.”

Yes, he did. Rene. Nobody’d give a shit if Gar decided to off her. Plus, killing his own daughter would send up a loud air horn signal to anybody else who thought about turning on him.

“And then there’s the matter of North.”

“What about him?”

Jake clicked his tongue and shook his head. “You work for him, and you seem to be good friends with him. If you don’t do what I want, I’m going to make his life miserable. If I don’t, then Gar will the moment Rene makes even an inch of trouble for him. North will be lucky to get a commercial spot on late night television.”

“He can just work for another studio. Lots of people like his movies and think he’s good.”

“Ever heard of the term ‘blackball’?”

J.S. thought a moment. He knew what it meant, but didn’t see how one guy, or even two, could stop Keith from working everywhere. Blackballing took a group of people ganging up on someone.

Jake said, “With the shit North pulled after his breakup with Kandet, it isn’t going to take much for Gar to convince other studio and production company executives that North’s bad news. Of course, maybe he’s planning to become a rancher permanently.”

J.S. watched a man hop out of his truck beside them, slap his hands on his arms, and do a quick run for the door. “None of it matters. Keith’s doing fine.”

“And Rene?”

“Rene’s doing okay, too.” J.S. put his hand on the door handle and shoved the door open against the cold.

“She won’t be if you don’t do something about Rancey,” Jake said, as J.S. slammed the door shut.

J.S. stood in the parking lot and watched Jake pull out. His fingers fumbled against the lining of his coat pocket for his keys. He climbed in, fired up the engine, and pulled out of the parking lot. The farm truck felt foreign to him as took the turn onto Route 93. The wind pelted against truck, and the rear end slid back and forth across the snow-covered ice.

His mind was doing a quarter mile drag with a thousand dollars on the line. He knew what Jake wanted. It didn't take but a third grade education to figure things out. Jake wanted him take the blame for whatever happened to Rancey. If he did, it would wrap things up into a neat little apple pie finish. Rene wouldn't have to do anything. Jake wouldn't have to do anything. Gar wouldn't have anything to worry about. The FBI could write off Rancey's murder. They could say Rancey was working some sort of case against him, or he bumped Rancey off to protect Rene. The FBI might know Rancey was putting pressure on Rene, and Gar was the one who wanted Rancey dead. But as long as they had some stupid shit of an ex-con to blame, and a legitimate reason for the con doing whatever he did, the dirty part of the FBI could twist things around to avoid shaking up the payoff system. They probably wouldn't even send another agent out to bother Rene. They wouldn't want another toilet to scrub.

Maybe that's what the shadow man was up to. He said he didn't want anybody bumping an agent off, that he just wanted somebody to shake a little sense into Rancey. But if shit came to shovel, maybe the shadow man's real job was to prevent Rancey from emptying pockets.

J.S. didn't want to murder Rancey, but he couldn't just ignore things and keep bopping along like he didn't know what was going on. Keith and Rene were first family he ever had, even if they weren't blood related. Blood wasn't as thick as people thought. Time, caring, those were the things that counted. His time with Keith might be short, but it was strong. His time with Rene ran as deep as the Blue Hole in Castalia—bottomless.

If Gar didn't cause Keith and Rene trouble, Rancey would. It was the only way either one of them could get what they wanted. Gar would ruin Keith to keep Rene in line, or kill Rene and ruin Keith for the fun of it. Rancey would ruin Keith to force Rene into helping him. Either way, Keith wound up screwed, and Rene wound up in the middle. All because Rene got him—James “Dumb-Ass” Seitz—out of prison.

His hands gripped the steering wheel so hard it made valleys across his palms. He took a sharp right onto Ashley Road. The tires crunched ice for another two miles before he spotted a

white sign with faded blue lettering. *Ridge Motel*. He glanced around and pulled into the bar parking lot across the street.

The motel looked old, probably built in the 50s, with little, or no, maintenance since. It had cheap fluorescent blue paint smeared across the stucco and slopped on the edges of the white trim. A fat man with a cigar hanging from his mouth sat in plain view only half-heartedly glancing up now and then from whatever he was looking at on the counter.

At first, J.S. wondered why Rancey holed-up in such a dump. But after a little thought, it came to him. The bill didn't involve Bureau money. Rancey was on personal time. Rene business. Considering the shadow man in the back of Darby's car, it was obvious Rancey didn't want the Bureau involved. Or was it? The shadow man didn't seem like Bureau material. Not even dirty Bureau. J.S. couldn't put his finger on it, but something about the guy, just as sure as a food stamp line at the first of the month, wasn't right.

Bureau or no Bureau, Gar or no Gar, Rancey still needed a lesson. Seeing the shooting on the morning news after it happened was bad enough, but listening to Keith and Rene describe it later was worse. He was certain Rancey was behind it, especially after hearing what Jake and the shadow man had to say.

Blaming it on a Hollywood director and his jealous wife didn't fit. Too many bullets. Too much excitement. The police didn't roll out like they were taking care of the Detroit riots just to grab a woman with a derringer. Plus, Rene was afraid of something. She didn't talk to him about diddly-do any more, but her moods told him she was paranoid. Her eyes jerked up every time the cowbell went off in her shop. That just wasn't Rene. She was usually calm, satisfied with her life, strong, like a mountain lioness feeding her cubs.

Where to handle Rancey was the only question. The motel wouldn't work. Rancey would look out, refuse to answer the door, and maybe call the police. No agent in his right mind would mosey off down some desolate highway, so that idea was a scratch. Waiting until he left and running him off the road or ramming him from behind wouldn't work, either. The car in front of the motel room looked like the typical Bureau sedan. It surely had a two-way radio.

J.S. didn't want any police involved, so it had to be someplace public. Not too public. Just enough that Rancey wouldn't expect a confrontation, but not public enough for the meeting to attract attention.

He sat for hours outside the motel before Rancey made an appearance. First, it was a trip to a movie theater, and another two-hour wait. Then, it was a stop at a grocery store. The movie theater was too quiet for even a small shouting match, but the grocery store might work.

J.S. pulled into the parking lot and took the first available space. The oval IGA sign loomed above him. Frozen ice glittered across the storefront windows. J.S. could see one cashier standing at the checkout. There were only five cars sitting in the parking lot. All, but one, were shoved to the back, in what looked like employee spaces.

Time to roll the dice and see what pops up. J.S. got out of the truck and crunched his way through the snow. The quiet swoosh of the sliding automatic doors announced him. The aisles were laid out in ten vertical lines with towering pyramids of cans and boxes at the ends. The place smelled of ammonia. His feet felt unsure on the wet speckled tile floor.

The checkout clerk looked up. She brushed a jagged strand of dark hair away from her face. Her dark eyes followed him as he walked down the front of the aisle.

“Can I help you find something?” she asked.

Rancey was standing in the breakfast and snack aisle. He had a box of Wheaties in his hand, staring at it.

“Nope. Found it. Thanks anyway.” J.S. walked quietly up behind Rancey. He stood for a second. His eyes wandered around the edge of Rancey’s dark blue, winter field jacket. Disarm, he thought.

In one quick motion, J.S. grabbed Rancey, spun him around, and kicked his legs apart. He forced his body against Rancey with one arm holding Rancey’s shoulders solid, while the other hand patted him down. He pulled the gun from the shirt holster and shoved it securely inside his own parka.

“Okay, what do I gotta do?” J.S. asked, his mouth an inch from Rancey’s ear.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Rancey struggled, but J.S. tightened his grip. “Sure you do.”

A lady with a cane tapped her way down the aisle, lugging a small poodle shoved inside her shopping bag. Her watery blue eyes looked at them startled before plucking a box of Raisin Bran from the shelf beside Rancey’s elbow.

J.S. smiled and nodded as she hurried away. Not much time left until the police arrive.

Rancey said, “This is going to get you in a whole lot of trouble. It’s going to—”

J.S. laughed. “Gonna what? Get me tossed back in prison? You aren’t thinking right, Teddy boy. This isn’t Whitefish. This is Missoula. I followed you down here so nobody would have any idea who I am or who I know or what I might be thinking about doing to you.”

Rancey continued to squirm against J.S. and the shelves.

“Yeah, that’s right.” J.S. tightened his grip on Rancey’s arm. “You don’t have a tape recorder on you. You haven’t got a thing that can prove I’m here.”

“The Bureau knows.”

“Sure they do. They know you’re on the take, too.”

Rancey quit struggling. Bingo. Jake hadn’t told him. The shadow man hadn’t told him, either. But it didn’t take more than a flip of a pea in the air to figure out Rancey was up to more than law enforcement. One thing years of working with Phil taught him—cops, no matter how high up on the scale they were, didn’t put as much pressure on anyone, as Rancey was putting on Rene, if money wasn’t involved. Rancey wasn’t just a rogue agent bent on doing his job at the risk of all the other agents like the shadow man said. He was dirty FBI.

J.S. yanked Rancey’s arm higher, folding it like a bat wing. “So how much are we talking about?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Think.” J.S. pushed harder and brought his mouth to Rancey’s ear. He needed to lie, and make it convincing. “Your Bureau pals don’t want you around. Agite doesn’t want you around. You can’t put me back in prison because you’d lose your leverage. You can’t kill Agite because you know his bulldogs would come after you, and the Bureau wouldn’t protect you. I could kill you, myself. Slit your throat and be done with it. I could even do it right here, and the Bureau would sweep it under the rug. Hell, Agite might even give me three or four hundred thousand for it. I could be sitting pretty, sipping margaritas down in Barbados.”

“The Bureau wouldn’t—”

“The Bureau wouldn’t do shit. They already know you’ve pissed off the mob. Do you think they really care if you live or die? One puny agent compared to all those other agents out there? It’s pretty simple. Your price sticker went too high. You’re a problem. Or are you so stupid you don’t know how obvious you’ve made the situation?”

The store manager came to the end of the aisle. "Is there a problem here?"

With a spin, J.S. turned Rancey loose and patted the front of his jacket. "No problem." He looked at Rancey. "Do you see a problem?"

Rancey shook his head no.

The manager clicked the price marker in his hand. "Okay, but whatever it is, I think you fellows need to take it outside."

Or what? Did the guy actually think he could take them out with a dollar ninety-eight price sticker? "We were just about to do that, sir," J.S. said.

The manager stood there, staring at them. He clicked his price marker again before he disappeared behind the aisle, leaving them to themselves.

Rancey said, "Look—"

J.S. put his finger to Rancey's chest. "No, you look, you skinny-ass white punk. If you think you can send me back to prison, fine. Do it. It isn't gonna to happen, but I don't have a problem going back and doing the rest of my time, or even the rest of my life, if I have to. Rene isn't involved with Gar Agite any more, and you need to back off. You ought to back off everything if you know what's good for you." He stopped and took a breath. "I don't need cooperation from anyone to take you out if you don't quit messing with Rene. I'll just do it and gladly take the time that comes with it. Do you get what I'm telling you?"

Rancey nodded.

J.S. took his finger off Rancey's chest and gave him one final hard look. "Okay, as long as we're clear, I think I'll be going on my way. You have a nice day."

J.S. strode down the aisle and hit the door as fast as he came in. Rene would have a shit fit if she knew what he just did. He didn't know what Keith would think, but he wasn't planning to tell him. The shadow man was lying. He knew it. The Bureau wouldn't give a shit about one agent dipping his fingers into the honey jar. He just had to figure out who, if anyone besides Gar, cared enough to send the shadow man.

The air bit at his lungs. He stopped beside the large blue and white trash can, fished inside his parka, and grabbed the gun. He wiped it clean and gave it a toss. It clattered on the way to the bottom.

J.S. climbed in the truck and took a deep breath. Have a nice day. What a screwed-up thing to say.

Chapter 23

Keith

Keith stood, staring out the picture window in the sitting room. The thick fur rug felt good against his bare feet. The flames lapping in the fireplace gave the room a warm glow. Mid-December snow rolled across the fields in thick, multi-layer sheets. Three solid weeks of snow piled up in day-to-day deposits.

Maybe he could get Rene to go snowmobiling again. A week earlier she, J.S. and he made the event a threesome. Rene laughed and raced up and down the hills across the back nine, circling J.S., and kicking snow up in his face. Watching Rene felt good, like catching a glimpse of a child on her first carnival ride. It was hard to believe she'd never snowmobiled before. J.S. was easy to understand, it being his first Montana winter. But Rene, with ten years, should have snow sports down to precision.

Keith rubbed his chin. Every time he saw her, Rene felt like a breeze rolling in from the northeast—soft, gentle, except for her humor. There she was an amusing piece of sarcasm. Her words were well thought out, but fell casually from her lips.

Her lips. They were custom made for long passionate kisses, even if for now, until she felt more comfortable with him, they led nowhere, or at least not into the bedroom, or anywhere beyond creating an intense obsession. The relationship was nothing close to his usual style.

What was his style, anyway? Before marrying Camille, he pursued her with flowers and long walks on the beach, anything romantic. No doubt because of his age. She was thirty and he was twenty-one, a meeting of summer and spring, and he felt enthralled with the “until death do us part.” But infatuated with her? No, she was his experience perhaps, but he never felt grasping to have her.

How had he handled his next fiancée? Well, he ran into her at a bar, took her home, and that was pretty much it until he dropped a ring on her finger. Not much romance to speak of. The relationship was pure lust. It ended after six months, and it should've, too. They had nothing in common outside of the bedroom, and her idolization.

He couldn't remember how he and Andrea moved from dating to engagement. They met on the set. Their first date was Chinese takeout. That much was clear, but where did they go from there? Well, he asked her to marry him less than a week later.

Most of the others were pretty much meet and have sex—maybe two, three or even four times. Sometimes he took them out for a few dinners. But none of them lasted long.

Keith rubbed his forehead. His thoughts were making him uncomfortable. The pattern was obvious. He felt stupid for not seeing it before now. Relationships came too fast or not at all. Well, that wouldn't be the case with Rene, unless she chose the not at all.

He sat down on the sofa, picked up his cup of coffee, and took a drink. He forced his thoughts to the view outside the window. The Montana snowfalls reminded him of upstate New York, where he grew up.

Sometimes he felt troubled that he rarely saw his parents. His grandparents died a few years back, one of them during the post-Andrea nightmare, leaving him to fend off the paparazzi at the funeral. What an ordeal.

His mother still lived in New York, his father in Los Angeles. He had a couple of half-brothers through his father's second wife. What was her name? Judith? Joan? He couldn't remember. He never knew any of them. His father divorced her shortly after his second half-brother was born and was now on his fourth marriage.

Keith tried to count the number of times his father visited him. A few Hollywood events, when his father came up, threw an arm around him, as though they were pals. But when he got right down to counting the number of times they were together, he could list every one. It was no more than a couple dozen times.

Would he make a better father than his own father? His first wife didn't want a child. She said it would spoil her figure and take her away from her dancing career too long.

His two fiancées weren't interested in having children. And the other women didn't commit enough to have a baby, or he didn't stick around long enough to find out whether any of them were pregnant.

Shit. Did he have a child running around out there without a father? His coffee cup felt heavy in his hand. He set it back on the end table and stood up. He started for the kitchen when

the doorbell rang. He waited a minute. No footsteps moved toward the door. Where the hell did J.S. take off to? He was flitting around a while ago. The doorbell rang again.

Keith grumbled, went to the door, and flung it open. The thick oak slapped the wall. “What?” he half-asked and half-shouted.

“Is that any way to answer the door?” Rene demanded.

“I didn’t know it was you.” His eyes wandered down her parka to her boots. She looked about twenty pounds heavier in her winter gear, but still sexy. Her cheeks glowed red from the cold, and her lips were moist with ChapStick.

She said, “Well, North, are you going to let me in? Or just stand there checking me out?”

“Sorry, I wasn’t—”

“Expecting me? I know. Is it a bad time?”

“No, not at all.” He stepped aside and led her to the kitchen where he poured both of them a fresh cup of coffee.

Keith leaned against the counter, as Rene sat down at the kitchen table and peeled off her parka. Her breasts bulged against the men’s thermal underwear shirt she was wearing. God, how he wanted to rip that shirt off her and get another look at those nipples, just waiting to be tongue-teased.

“What?” She squinted at him as though she were trying to read his thoughts.

“Oh, nothing,” he said. “It’s just good to see you.”

She laughed. “It’s good to see you, too.” Her hands wrapped around the coffee mug in front of her. “This feels good. Nice and hot.”

“You know, I was thinking—”

“I need to tell you something,” she said. “I’m, well. . . I’m leaving in about eight hours for Ohio.”

“Ohio?”

“Yeah, I’m going for a couple of months, maybe more, maybe less. I honestly don’t know.” Her voice sounded cautious with a hint of sadness. She sipped her coffee. “I just got a call this morning from my mother.”

Somehow, he didn’t think she communicated with anyone from her family. But he never considered a mother.

“She says my father is in the hospital and she wants me to come home.” She sat her coffee cup down and focused on it. “I’m not thrilled about it, mostly because my father is an asshole, and I don’t care whether he lives or dies.”

“Well, maybe. . .” Keith wanted to tell her things might have changed since she left. That maybe she and her father could make amends. But he had no idea how it might feel to come from a crime family. Sure, his parents were distant, but he didn’t feel the need to avoid them, or run away from them. He just didn’t feel much of anything about them.

“Well, I can at least see a couple friends and my sister,” Rene said with a weak smile. “I mean my adoptive sister, Catherine. I don’t have any full sisters.”

“What about brothers?”

“Nope. I have an adoptive brother, but no biological ones. And I’m not very close to Dan, so I doubt I’ll go out of my way to see him.”

“So. . .” Keith said.

Rene’s forehead wrinkled, as if she was considering what he might want to hear. “I just wanted to let you know why I won’t be around for a while, and that it isn’t anything personal.”

“Yes, well, it sounds like something you have to do.”

Her eyes met his. They were a gray combination of expressions he couldn’t read. They darted back to her coffee. She started rambling about what she was going to do with the shop and her apartment. She asked him if he would mind asking J.S. if he would check in on her plants once in a while to make sure they didn’t bump off while she was gone.

Keith said, okay, but mostly he listened and thought about how he wished she wouldn’t go. His feelings were mixed. He never felt glum about Andrea leaving when she went off on movie shoots, or even on one of her short spa treks to “stay on top,” as she put it. He wasn’t even sure he felt anything when his wife visited her relatives. Maybe he had. It was so long ago, he couldn’t remember.

“Tell me about your marriage,” he said, changing the subject.

She looked at him, her gray eyes dark with puzzlement. “There isn’t much to tell. We were married shortly after I arrived here. You might know him, even. His name is Bill Thomas. He runs the Union 76 station.”

“No, I don’t think so. That’s not generally where I get my gas.”

“Well, he handles repairs, too, if you ever need them.”

Keith was surprised she would recommend her ex to him, but in a way, he felt relieved because he didn't think he could handle any more complications. One ex-lover with an attitude, and a dead boyfriend who looked like him were enough. “So what happened?”

Rene shifted in her seat. “I shouldn't have married him. I didn't love him. I realized afterwards it wasn't going to work, at least not for me. I wish I hadn't hurt him, though. Bill's a nice guy.”

“Sounds like my first marriage. I was twenty-one and she was thirty.”

She laughed. “I'm sorry, but that sounds like most men I've dated.” Her eyes turned thoughtful for a few seconds. “Well, except for one.” She shook her head. Her long dark strands of hair fell over her shoulder and spilled out on the table. “What is it with you guys and older women, anyway?”

Keith grinned. “I suppose we have to learn the finer points of lovemaking somewhere.”

“Yes.” Her eyes ran down his body, making the hair stand up on his arms. “I suppose you do at that.”

Rubbing his arms, he decided to change the subject again. “Hey, I'll tell you what.” He pulled his keys from his pocket and removed one with gold markings. “If you come back and I'm not here. . .”

Her eyes gave him a quizzical look.

Damn, how could he say what he wanted without sounding as though he was pushing her into something she might be trying to avoid? “Well, if you'd like to find me to talk or something,” he said, placing the key on the table, “just come to my house in L.A. and let yourself in, okay?”

Rene stared at the key. He thought she was going to make him take it back, but she didn't. Instead, she tucked it into her pocket and said, “Thanks.”

Well, at least there's a possibility, Keith thought, as he went around the table and yanked her up from her chair. His mouth met hers. They kissed until he had to pull away. It was that, or shove her down on the table and take her. “You realize we only have eleven and a half more months until this year is up,” if waiting, like she wanted, didn't drive him into a abyss of sexual frustration before he got the chance to show her how much he could please her.

Chapter 24

Jake

Jake looked up from the gray speckled hospital floor. He stretched his back against the curve of the hard plastic chair. An aide stopped in front of him and shoved a strand of dirty blonde hair beneath her hairnet before she continued forward. The front tires of the food cart she was pushing dodged around other carts filled with medical supplies and equipment. She disappeared into a room four doors down from Gar's.

Jake stared at the pale green wall in front of him. A minute later, a male voice shouted, "You expect me to eat this shit?"

A clattering sound followed. The aide reappeared and hurried down the hallway in the opposite direction. She tapped a tall, thin man wearing green scrubs on the arm. He looked up from the floor he was mopping and squinted, as she talked and pointed. Shaking his head, he slopped the gray twisted strands into the yellow bucket and used the mop handle to steer as the two of them headed toward the room.

Jake stood up and listened to the voices behind the closed door next to the chair. Gar's gasping low voice came first, and Irene's smaller, softer voice followed.

Sitting back down, Jake stared at the wall again. Leaving Montana felt like walking away from something unfinished. Not Rancey. Not Rene. Virginia. Telling her that he had to leave was the most difficult thing he'd ever had to tell a woman in his life. She didn't snivel. He just didn't want to tell her.

"Maybe you'll come back," she said.

The auburn sadness in her eyes caused him to look at the wooden sidewalk beneath his feet. They were standing in front of Buffalo Clyde's diner. The smell of barbeque ribs and the sound of people talking and laughing drifted out with each swing of the door. "You could come with me."

Virginia's eyes shifted to the jagged slopes of the mountains at the end of the street. "I wish I could, but. . ."

"But?"

“I left all of that a long time ago,” she said, her voice quiet, almost inaudible.

Jake started to ask her what, but decided against it. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right.”

Five hours later, he was on a flight to Ohio. Six hours after that, he was standing at Gar’s bedside, wondering why he bothered. Gar didn’t need him to run the business. But what else could he do? Crime wasn’t something a person could walk away from, not at the level and length he had behind him.

Money wasn’t the issue. It was in the beginning, but not now. Common sense, and a whole lot of street smarts, treated him right. His investments paid off, and his life was now secure. So, what was it? Why didn’t he just hop the first flight out? Rene did. Virginia did. Although he wasn’t exactly sure what Virginia was hiding from. Maybe Rancey.

Jake shook his head. He wouldn’t put it past a shit like Rancey, but that about summed it up. Leaving meant a lifetime of dodging the noose. Even if a person managed to get past the initial break, someone like Rancey would show up later. Or someone like himself.

Great. Now there’s a thought, the hunter becoming the hunted. Well, it didn’t matter. That wasn’t why he stayed. He wasn’t afraid of a pathetic little fox hunt. He just didn’t want to waste five years of sucking up to Gar. It wasn’t about money. Fear, either. It was about power.

Jake stood and paced in front of the door. Too bad Virginia couldn’t swallow what he did for a living. She was the first woman, other than Rene, he wanted enough to offer up an honest explanation. At least he didn’t feel like a lust-stricken dog, humping every leg in sight, begging for a substitute, like he felt with Rene.

Virginia had that part right. People shouldn’t take things too far until they knew the outcome was something they could handle. There was a piece of wisdom a person couldn’t buy.

The door beside him swung open. Irene stepped out, bringing the light smell of Chanel into the hallway. Her short, plump body was slumped at the shoulders. The gray streaks in her black hair seemed more pronounced trapped in her tightly drawn bun. Her eyes were red, and streaks ran through her makeup.

Jake wanted to hug her, let her feel the comfort of his arms. Irene wasn’t his mother, but at times, that’s the way he felt about her when he listened to her fuss. Was he eating right, did

he have a good housekeeper, would he like her to do any mending for him, how could he manage without the love of a good woman?

Sometimes her questions seemed intrusive. Other times, they felt like the fresh pieces of fry bread and warmed up enchiladas she shoved at him. “Here, try something besides that Italian food you’re always eating.” She was a strong woman who expressed her love with a skillet.

“Gar wants to see you,” Irene said in a worn, monotone voice.

Jake brushed a strand of hair from her face. “Why don’t you go home and get a little sleep?”

“Not yet. I need to tell you something when you’re through.”

Jake hesitated, but her hand shooed him inside. He shrugged and opened the door. The smell of Cloroseptic spilled from the room. The loud suction pulses of the respirator positioned at the top of the bed dwarfed the smaller blips of the heart monitor coming from behind him. Gar’s face was covered with a plastic mask. He looked drawn, his paper-thin skin pulled tight across his cheek bones, eliminating his usual jowl and making him look even older than he looked the day before. His squared shoulders now slumped.

Jake positioned himself beside the bed and clasped his hands below his waist, a show of respect. He wanted Gar’s power, but he didn’t wish the man dead. Gar treated him like a son, taught him what he knew, and kept him in line when his actions required restraint.

Gar’s voice was muffled but clear. “You lied to me.”

“About what?” Jake’s mind raced across everything said over the last three weeks since he returned to Ohio.

“You told me you took care of Rene.”

Jake looked away, to the cross hanging on the wall. “I took care of the problem.”

Gar lay there suctioning breath, his dark eyes hard. “You never were very bright, were you, Jakie?”

Jake’s eyes started to roll at the insult, but he forced himself away from the act. No point in pushing the conversation up another notch. “Bright enough to know you didn’t need to take her out to resolve the problem.”

“You think you resolved the problem?” Gar slowly shook his head. “Well, I have news for you. I never even told you the problem. Why?”

Jake didn’t answer. The question wasn’t posed for a response.

“Because you couldn’t comprehend it even if I smacked you up side the head with it.”

“So smack me now. Maybe I’ll understand more than you think.”

Gar’s fat tongue slipped from his mouth as though he meant to lick away the insults.

“Just do what I told you.”

“I don’t see the point.”

“Simple. Do it, or lose everything.”

“Meaning?”

“See? The answer is obvious, yet you’re asking.” Gar’s hand reached out and waved with a dismissive flash. “Leave me.”

Jake stood in place a moment. He wanted to tell Gar he needed to know the answer. That he couldn’t follow the order without a reason, a justifiable consequence to avoid.

“I said, leave me,” Gar repeated.

Turning away, Jake pushed the door open and stepped into the hallway. His feet felt heavy on the slick tile. The air smelled of sickness, filling up his lungs, his mind. He understood the stakes. It was Rene or himself.

His mind leafed through the years like a thumb running across the pages of a thick file. Yes, he once lived with Rene, but nothing he could pull out told him why Gar hated her so much. Not enough to kill her himself. No, Gar apparently didn’t have the balls to do the job. Instead, he wanted someone else to take care of it.

But why him? Jake strode toward the waiting room and the elevator leading out. His thoughts were still flipping through every detail he remembered; first, Rene; then, Gar; neither produced an answer.

He turned the corner. A hand fell on his shoulder. He jerked around, expecting to see one of the other men, someone there to see Gar, or perhaps take care of another problem. But instead, he found Irene, her lips drawn tight.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” she said.

Jake stood, looking at her a moment, before he let his eyes trail to the floor. She didn't need to see his thoughts. His trouble wasn't hers.

"Here, come on." She took his hand and led him down the hallway.

He stood beside her, as her finger pressed the elevator button. Somehow, he felt comforted just being with her, perhaps even consoled. They were both working through their own form of grief. He, for losing faith in a man he admired. She, for losing the life of the man she married.

As they entered the coffee shop, Jake made a quick inventory of the room. A couple sat in the back, huddled together in conversation, but the room was otherwise empty of customers. The woman behind the counter wiped the sweat from her forehead. The air felt heavy with grease.

Jake stepped up to the register, rubbed his nose, and ordered two cups of coffee—one black with sugar for him, the other with cream and sugar for Irene. He dropped two dollars on the counter and picked up the Styrofoam cups. The heat seeped through to his fingers, warming his thoughts as he settled into the booth.

Irene pulled a Kleenex from her purse. She dabbed her eyes, still red and swollen, but her makeup was repaired. Her purse snapped shut with a sharp click before she picked up her cup and took a gentle sip. "I'm sorry. I don't mean to get so emotional."

"No need to be sorry, Irene. It's only natural for you to feel upset about Gar." Jake felt the solid bump of a person sliding into the booth behind him. The movement jarred his back and sent a sharp pain to his legs, but he ignored it, his eyes focused on Irene. He wanted her to understand how much he sympathized with her feelings. Thirty years was a long time to spend with a man. Even if the man was a shit.

"It has nothing to do with my husband." Her eyes drifted to the open doorway. They were glazed, as though her thoughts ran beyond the walls to a place he couldn't understand. "No, that isn't true. It has everything to do with my husband." Her eyes met his again. "But I want to let you know I'm glad you didn't go through with it."

Jake felt his face twitch, but he willed it away, or at least enough to cover his surprise. For some reason, he never thought Irene knew what her husband did. She baked, cleaned and

seemed to mind her own business. But maybe not. Maybe she understood, or even participated in, more than he thought, perhaps like a Gar's muzzle, however light the effect.

Irene took another drink of her coffee and focused on her hands. "My daughter has done nothing wrong other than getting involved with Phil Matio. That was wrong. You shouldn't have gotten involved with him, either."

"That was a long time ago. He's not around any more."

"True, but you are. You traded one evil man for another." Her eyes shifted to a distant glaze again.

Jake wondered what she was thinking, what things she saw in the past she might not want to tell, how much she knew, how far back her knowledge went. "I made my choice. I knew what I was getting into."

Irene snapped to attention. "Did you? Did you really?" She shook her head. "No, I don't think you did. If you had, if you'd understood his reasoning, I doubt you would've gotten involved." Her breathing was calm, a slow rising and falling that seemed deliberate. "I realize you hated my daughter for leaving you, but I don't think you would've been a willing participant in my husband's hatred. You loved her. She loved you. That much I know."

"Well, she doesn't love me now. She's with someone else."

"No, that's where you're wrong." Irene's fingers toyed with the Kleenex still in her hands. "She may be with someone else. In fact, I know she is, even though she hasn't told me. I'm not stupid. I read the papers. I saw what happened in Los Angeles. But a woman doesn't walk away from love. Women aren't made that way. Love stays with us."

Jake started to speak, but Irene waved him off, the Kleenex fluttering in the air.

"I'm not saying Rene still wants you. Only she can say whether that's true or not. I'm just telling you deep down inside she still loves you." Irene stood, tucked her purse beneath her arm, and picked up her coffee. "You need to trust me on this, Jake. I know what I'm talking about. Rene will never intentionally hurt you. Never. She still loves you." Her short pumps took a step forward, but stopped. "Tell me something, Jake. Have you ever known me to lie?"

"No," Jake said. "I haven't."

She nodded. "Good." The scent of Chanel followed her as she left.

Jake sat still, his hands frozen in place around his cup. The dark brown fluid snaked steam into the air as his mind flooded with pictures of Rene. Not the Rene he knew now, but the one who loved him. He wondered if Irene was right. Probably. Rene leaving had nothing to do with a lack of love. If he hadn't—

“Touching conversation,” a voice came from behind him.

Jake took a breath, picked up his coffee, and sipped it, cursing himself for burying so far into his thoughts he missed Rancey's entrance. “Glad you liked it.”

“I wonder if it's true,” Rancey said.

Jake shrugged. “Hard to say.”

“Well, I suppose it doesn't matter, does it?”

Two teenagers walked through the door, both wearing black leather with chains dangling from their pockets. Their hair was frozen in multi-colored spikes. Their boots clicked across the tile. The counter woman scowled and folded her arms across her chest.

“Is that why you're here?” Jake asked. “To check up on my love life?”

Rancey laughed. “Hardly. I just thought I'd let you know your boy wasn't successful.”

“My boy?”

“Yeah, you know.” Rancey's voice stopped for moment. “The boy who hasn't been off the farm long enough to forget what his freedom's worth.”

Jake chose not to respond.

“Were you actually stupid enough to think J.S. would kill me?”

Jake laughed. “What makes you think I put him up to something like that? Seems like you've given him enough reason on your own.”

The harsh sound of french fries hitting grease drew Jake's attention. The lighter sizzle of hamburgers and smell of grilled meat caused his stomach to rumble. No food since yesterday evening was beginning to wear on him, even though hamburgers weren't his idea of a meal.

“Well, perhaps we should forget about who flushed J.S. out of the woodwork and get down to business,” Rancey said, his voice sharp.

“And what business is that?”

“I'm sure you already know.”

Jake took the last drink of his coffee and crumpled the cup in his hand. “Yes, I already know. I’m just not interested in playing.”

“Oh, you’ll play.”

“And if I don’t?”

“There won’t be any business.”

“I see.” Jake stood up and tossed the cup in the trashcan. “The funny thing here, Agent Rancey, is I may not even be a player, so you may very well be wasting your time.”

Rancey blinked, just enough movement to let Jake know he was working the information over in his head. “Oh, you’ll be a player,” Rancey said, his mask of calm back in place. “Once Gar’s gone, you’ll be the only player. We both know you won’t give that up.”

Jake let a slow grin spread across his lips before he turned to leave. “You never know, now do you, Agent Rancey?”

Chapter 25

J.S.

J.S. placed one grocery sack on his knee and tightened the grip on the other in his arm, while pinning the first with an elbow. He felt like a crane as he shoved the key in the lock. Just when the key twisted, the door sprung open.

“Good, Lord!” Keith grabbed the sack on J.S.’s knee. “Knock, why don’t you? We could wind up with oranges all over the place.”

“Like you’d answer it.” J.S. pushed his way through the door.

“Hey! I answer the bell. In fact, you weren’t here, so I answered it this morning.”

J.S. huffed and set the sack on the slick Formica counter. Keith hoisted the other sack up. They both stood for a second, their eyes focused on the bags, before J.S. pulled his coat off and started shuffling apples into the refrigerator. The kitchen was too hot. He stopped and reached for the heat vent. “What’d you do? Crank the heat up to ninety?”

Keith laughed. “Seventy-five. You know I’m used to the L.A. climate.”

“Well, you’re living with someone from Ohio.” J.S. pointed at the orange in Keith’s hand. “You gonna eat that? Or just stare at it?”

“You mean it never makes it to seventy-five degrees in Ohio? And I’m going to eat it, if you don’t mind. Why all the food, anyway? The refrigerator’s already stuffed to the gills.”

J.S. started moving bananas, oranges and pears to the metal baskets hanging from the ceiling. The counter was too crowded with appliances to hold the big brass fruit bowls in the cabinet. “Fruit sale. And sure, it gets hot in Ohio. That’s why they have air conditioning.”

Keith sat down at the table, dug his fingernail into the orange, and peeled off a piece of skin. “Wonder where they got the fruit?”

“I dunno. California. Florida. Somewhere hot.” J.S. flipped the switch off on the coffee pot. “You gotta remember to turn this thing off when it’s out of coffee.”

“Sue me.” Keith popped a section of orange into his mouth.

“Shit. Sue you. Like that’d do me any good.”

Keith coughed and thumped his chest. “Crap. Now you’ve made me choke on my food. What do you mean it wouldn’t do you any good? I’ve got plenty of money. You might wind up sitting on the beach in the Bahamas if you managed to win a good case against me.”

J.S. pulled the sloppy filter from the coffee pot and tossed it into the trashcan. “Nah, you’d get a fleet of lawyers, and I’d be out of a job, living on the streets, pushing a grocery cart with a sad ass look on my face.”

Keith laughed. “Collecting cans, no doubt. How about firing up some more coffee?”

“Who’d you say came over?” J.S. dug through the cabinet beside the sink. “What’d you do with the filters?”

“I didn’t say, and the filters are sitting right there in front of you on the counter.”

“Oh,” J.S. said. In with the filter, in with the coffee, in with the water, on with the switch, now what? He felt like a maid. No, cranky. That’s how he felt. Five errands, and it wasn’t even 11:00 a.m. yet.

“I have a message for you. Two, actually.”

J.S. sat down and took a deep breath. Five months of living with Keith and he was lucky if he had three messages total, let alone two in one morning. “So, spit ‘em out.”

“First, your parole officer called and said he wants you to stop by his office.”

J.S. frowned. That didn’t sound good. He just saw Darby two days ago, and this was the first time Darby ever ordered him to come to his office. “And the second?”

“Rene. She asked if you’d look out for her plants. She left her key with Virginia.”

“Plants? Why should I be the one looking out for her plants?”

“I don’t know.” Keith shrugged. “She said she was going to Ohio and wouldn’t be back for a couple of months, and asked if—”

J.S. jumped up from the table. “And you let her go?”

Keith’s expression flipped open like a door, mouth gaping, eyes wide. “What was I supposed to do? Hog-tie her to a chair?”

“Okay, sorry. I gotta go.” J.S. pulled his coat on and grabbed the Bronco keys off the counter. “I’ll be gone for a while. The checkbook and bills are in the office. Ask Hank if you need any help, but keep an eye on the receipts. I’ve been having a little trouble with Hank and feed invoices.”

Keith grabbed his arm. "Wait a minute. What's wrong?"

"No time to explain."

"Well, then I'm going."

"No, you can't."

"What do you mean I can't?" Keith shoved his arm in his coat. "I can do whatever I want. You aren't my mother, and besides, you're taking my Bronco."

J.S. stopped and let out a deep breath. "Look, bro, if you don't want me using the Bronco, fine, I won't. But either way, you aren't going. You have no idea what the hell you'd be. . . look, I don't mean to get smart with you, but I honestly don't need to worry about looking after your skinny white ass."

Keith stood frozen with one arm in his coat and the other in mid-pull as though his thoughts were bouncing between reactions.

"Sorry, I had to lay it on you like that."

"Don't forget about Darby!" Keith shouted as J.S. went out the door.

J.S.'s feet pounded the sidewalk leading to the garage. The frigid air bit at his lungs. Darby was all he needed. He didn't have time to fuss about what time he got in, how his job was going, who he was seeing, was he hanging around with any felons, parole officer crap. But he couldn't leave without Darby's permission. Not if he didn't want to wind up back in the box.

"Okay. Calm your ass down," J.S. told himself as he got behind the wheel. A pit stop at Darby's office would only take fifteen minutes or so. No, that wouldn't work right. Darby wasn't going to let him go back to Ohio. The parole board made their terms clear. No Ohio. Not until he made it past a year.

J.S. gripped the steering wheel. There had to be a way around things. Maybe he could talk some sense into Rene on the telephone. Doubtful. She was as pigheaded as Keith when she set her mind to something. But. . .

He jumped out of the car and made a quick jog back to the house. He flung the door open. The frame bounced against the wall.

Keith looked up from his coffee. "That was fast."

"Changed my mind. Gotta make a phone call."

The distance down the hall to his room seemed long, like a tunnel lined with off-white walls and stained wooden beams. He pushed the door to his room open and closed it behind him. He didn't want his voice echoing down the hallway to the kitchen. Keith didn't need to get involved. Not that he wasn't already flopping around in the middle of things. Just knowing Rene was enough to put him there.

J.S. sat down on the bed, pulled the telephone beside him, and tapped out the number. Several rings passed before a gruff voice came on the line. "Darby speaking."

"Hey, this is James Seitz. I heard you wanted me to come to your office, but with all the snow, I thought I could just call you."

The telephone fizzed. Nothing. J.S. didn't hear a click, but he wondered if Darby was still on the line.

"Yeah, probably," Darby said, his tone irritated. "Let's just put it this way, Seitz. Stay in Montana."

J.S. frowned. Darby knew something. Ask him? No, play along. "You don't need to remind me. Where do you think I'm going, anyway?"

"You already know."

J.S. hesitated. Apparently, Darby knew Rene left town. He probably even knew why. "Okay, but I need to ask you something."

Dead air.

J.S. pushed ahead. "That guy, the one you brought with you when you picked me up at the tavern?"

"Yeah?"

"I need to talk with him." The questions Darby might ask floated in his head. Why? About what? When? Where? The answers were easy enough.

But Darby didn't ask any questions. "I'll have him call you." A click sent the line dead.

J.S. hung up the receiver and placed the telephone on the oak table beside his bed. His eyes focused on the picture of him and Rene. His arms were around her. They were both laughing, and he was hugging her for all she was worth. Keith wasn't in the picture. He wondered if that was the way things would turn out in the end.

Chapter 26

Rene

Rene stepped to the curb. The fumes of the Cleveland International Airport were stinging, metallic, worse than she remembered. Cars coughed their way along the pavement to unknown destinations. Horns blared, and drivers flipped their hands up in the air, shouting at stopped vehicles. Bumpers edged to the curb. People picking up passengers, mimes, perfect in their devotion to the people they were retrieving, jumped from cars, snatching up bags and hoisting them with or without care into wide-mouthed trunks. People pushed through the sliding doors, jostling her aside.

The porter said, "You want me to flag a cab for you?"

Her luggage was stacked on the cart behind him, two large suitcases and two carryon bags. Every piece of clothing she owned was folded and ready for action.

"No, I can get it."

He dropped her luggage on the taxi line. She flagged the attendant. A green and white taxi pulled from the back and darted to the front of the pack.

The attendant yelled, "Hey! No cutting!"

Several cab drivers shouted, red-faced at the loss of a fare. The offending driver jumped out, popped the trunk, and stowed her luggage. His hand slammed the lid closed, and he hurried to open the back door for her.

Rene shrugged, waving an apology to the other drivers, and climbed inside. The interior felt warm, a blanket against the icy winds whipping off the lakefront. She settled back and closed her eyes as the driver slipped behind the wheel.

The driver coughed. The door opposite her sprung open. Rene's eyes popped to attention.

"Hello, Ms. Matio," Agent Rancey said as he climbed in.

Crap. The taxi took off. "What do you want?" Rene scooted against the window handle. "You wanted me here. I'm here. Just let me take care of it."

Rancey plopped his briefcase on the floor and looked at his cuticles.

Rene put out her best glare. "Don't you have any other cases to take care of?"

“I take care of them. I just check on you inbetween. Call it my way of reminding you that I’m still around.”

“Like I could forget.”

Silence filled the cab for a minute before Rancey spoke. “You know, your father probably isn’t going to make it.” His voice carried what sounded like a hint of sadness.

Why sadness? “So I gather.”

“Too bad, really.”

Her eyes rolled. She didn’t want them to roll. They just spun around in a circle on their own and landed on the side window. Rancey was an idiot. First, he wanted her to help him put a leash on her father. Then, he offered to get J.S. out of prison in exchange for her cooperation. Next, he worked his way up to threatening and ordering her—not to help him convict her father, but into doing whatever it took to put her father out of business. Now, when he was about to get what he wants, he feels regret?

Rene turned to face Rancey again. He was staring straight ahead at the windshield. The smell of Old Spice wafted from his neat midnight blue suit and starched white shirt. She rested her hand on the seat beside her. The vinyl felt cracked and sticky. “I thought you didn’t like my father.”

Rancey shrugged. “I knew what he was.”

What? An asshole? “Well, that certainly makes two of us, but if he’s gone, you no longer have a problem.”

“Yes, we do.”

Rene frowned.

“The business won’t disappear. It will just change hands.”

“Probably, but I can’t do much about that. My father won’t be in charge any more.”

“Jake Batella will be. Remember him?” Rancey brushed his hand hard against the smooth fabric covering his knee. “I’ve already told you. We need to pressure—I mean take care of Jake Batella.”

The slip of words wasn’t lost on her. Pressure. What type of pressure? Force Jake into shutting the doors, going on his way, forgetting he was ever involved?

Rene laughed. Not more than a single burst, but enough to cause Rancey's blue eyes to harden.

"You think I said something funny?"

"In a way. How do you expect me to shut the business down? You never told me how I should go about accomplishing such a thing, other than wanting me to go back, get involved, and do whatever it takes."

"Who said—? Never mind. I just want you to get in close with Batella, and let me know what's going on." Rancey tapped the driver on the shoulder and pointed at the sidewalk. "Pull over there."

The taxi eased over, and Rancey opened the door, letting the smothering smell of exhaust flow through the cab. "I'll let you know later what I want you to do. Just get as much information as you can."

Rene sat in silence, her eyes focused on the one polished shoe remaining in the taxi, as Rancey pulled his body out with his briefcase in hand. Something didn't feel right. What Rancey said he wanted sounded like something the Bureau would put him up to doing, but the emotions he let slip weren't typical Bureau behavior.

Before the cab took off, Rancey's head jutted back inside. "Do you understand?"

No, she didn't. She needed to figure out why Rancey was showing fracture signs. "Yes, I understand what you want."

The car door slammed, and the taxi pulled away. For a second, Rene wondered if the driver was an agent, too. She stared at the face in the mirror, then at the hack license. Same face. Arnold Fritz.

She looked away. Whether he was Bureau or not didn't matter. At least he was going the right direction. The tall office buildings melted away to smaller shops and then strip malls. The sky looked ice laden. Late December never was a strong snow point for Cleveland, too cold, or not cold enough.

The closer they got to Westlake, the more lakefront spread across the northern vista. Gray water thrust up in small white peaks, rolling away from the distant Canadian border and lapping against invisible rocks. She wondered why her father didn't live on Lake Erie. He loved to fish. He had enough money.

Rene shook her head. There wasn't any point in remembering the good things about her father. They were gone. Dead the day he signed her adoption papers. Not that she had many good memories to erase.

The cab driver pulled off the freeway, took several sharp turns, and placed her in front of her parents' home. He got out and retrieved her luggage from the truck.

Rene followed him. "How much do I owe you?"

He waved her off. "The guy already paid me enough."

Well, that explains. Rancey hired him. Everything has a price. "Okay," she said.

He didn't listen, though. He was already in the taxi, his foot on the gas, the car moving away.

Rene stood there, watching his brake lights work while they swung around the corner. She didn't want to face her mother. How many years was it? Not quite as long as the last time she saw her father. Her mother came to her apartment several times after she moved out of Phil's. The meetings were always uncomfortable. Drinking coffee, maybe nipping at a few cookies her mother brought, but never saying anything important, never discussing why they were no longer together, or why her mother signed away her motherhood.

Okay, so ten years. No contact, other than by telephone, with her mother since 1979, not after she moved in with Jake, never in Montana.

Rene turned to look at the house. Sprawling brick ranch, black roof, white shutters, nothing exceptional, just like she remembered. The trees were bigger, though. The blacktop driveway was now concrete.

Juggling her luggage, she walked up the front walk and rang the bell.

"Come in!" her mother shouted as she peered through the kitchen window.

Rene opened the door and shoved her suitcases and bags to the side. Just as in the past, the house wasn't locked. Safety wasn't an issue. Never had been. Probably never would be. Her father's reputation was a sufficient alarm system.

The living room looked different. Somehow smaller. Cluttered with furniture, mostly antiques, which wasn't surprising now that her father was in the stolen antique business.

Her eyes landed on the wall of photographs arranged in puzzle fashion, their frames a mishmash of gold brocade, black, oak, cherry, and pewter. Rene stepped closer so she could

examine the smiling faces of her grandparents, her mother's parents. They were standing in front of an unpainted house, arms at their sides, big smiles on their faces. Her grandmother was wearing a traditional Shawnee ceremonial dress, white hide, fringe and beadwork across the bodice. Her grandfather had a white garnished sombrero dangling down his back, held up only by the string around his neck, a white suit with a Mexican blanket thrown over his shoulder.

The gallant Mexican, and the Indian maiden. Looking at the picture, one might think they were posing for tourists. But as it was, Rene knew they weren't. No one accepted such a mixture of blood in the 30s. Perhaps it was their wedding picture.

On the right were her German grandparents, second generation, on her father's side. Square jaw lines, tight expressions on their faces, dark clothing with a splash of white around the collars.

Seeing her parents inbetween both sets of grandparents, made her wonder how such a match came about. How they met, what inspired them to marry.

Above her parents was a picture of her in her white lace confirmation dress, her hair flowing down to her hips, her smile frozen in place. Thirteen. Maybe fourteen. She couldn't remember how old she was.

"In here," her mother called. "Sorry, that was the doctor, and I had to—"

The telephone rang again as Rene walked from the living room into the kitchen. Brass pots and skillets hung from ceiling hooks. Flour was spread across wax paper on the counter with a rolling pin resting in the middle. She breathed in the smell of tortillas warming with jam filling.

Her mother sat at the table, strands of hair loose from her bun and hanging around her chin. She had the telephone headset pinned to her ear. Her fingers toyed with a piece of paper. "Yes, she's here now. Do you want to talk with her? You have the address and telephone number down correctly, yes?" Silence as her mother listened to whoever was on the other end. "Okay. Well, I hope the information helps. I know how much this means to you." She motioned Rene closer. "It's your friend, J.S., in Montana."

Rene blinked. She didn't even know J.S. had her mother's number. And why were they having such an extended conversation? Her hand reached for the receiver. "How'd you—?"

“Look,” J.S. cut her off, “I know what you’re up to, and if I could, I’d come to Ohio, duct tape you, and toss your butt on the next plane back. So, I’m telling you. Come back. Now!”

Rene’s smile grew bigger with the rise in J.S.’s voice. “Talk about bossy.”

“You got that. We’ll figure a way out of this. But I’m telling you. Parole officer or not, prison or not, I’m coming after you if you don’t come back pronto.”

“Hold on a minute.” Rene walked away from her mother. The telephone cord stretched to the length of its coils, as she edged around the corner back into the living room. “Okay, I needed some privacy because I have to tell you something.” She hesitated. “I don’t know where to start, so I’ll blurt it out.”

“Blurt away, but it better include coming back.”

“No, sorry, it doesn’t include that. I have to stay here. But trust me, I know what I’m doing. It’s not like you think.”

“That doesn’t sound like a—”

“No, now listen. Do you remember that day at the farmhouse?”

“Yeah. So?”

“Do you also remember the night when I told Buddy to pull over, and right afterwards there was a three car pileup and two people wound up dead?”

Only static came from the other end.

“And when I told you that we shouldn’t do the job? The night you got arrested?”

“Yes, I should’ve listened. I shouldn’t have let Jake talk me into going. If I hadn’t gone, my sorry ass would’ve never wound up in prison. But why’d you go if you knew what was going to happen?”

Rene sighed, shifted on her feet, and leaned against the wall. Would he believe her? Screw it. So what if he didn’t? “Because if I hadn’t gone, both of you would’ve wound up dead. Jake would’ve gone into the house with you waiting at the window. The guy would’ve shot both of you. But I went. I knew the guy was coming, so I didn’t do anything except bail in and out of the window. I didn’t walk around. I didn’t check anything out. I just went in and jumped out. I should’ve known I needed to stop you from clubbing the guy. But I didn’t. I’m sorry.”

“No need. I’m the one who did it.”

“I suppose, but I should’ve figured it out when my instincts told me that I needed to pull you away from something. I should’ve thought about what was going to happen before I felt the need to pull you away. All I saw, in my head, was my arm on yours, yanking, tugging, dragging. I didn’t know what was going to happen or why, but I knew I needed to be there. Do you understand what I’m telling you? I think you already know. We’ve been around one another a long time. But we’ve never—”

“Talked about it,” J.S. finished.

Silence. Seconds passed. Rene didn’t say anything.

“I knew,” J.S. said, his voice quiet. “Still know.”

Rene slid down the wall to the floor and sat with her knees angled up. Now, she needed to handle the difficult part. Lying wasn’t in her nature. But she didn’t see any way around it. “So will you take me serious if I tell you something now?”

“I suppose so.”

“No suppose. I need a yes or no.”

“Okay, yes. Yes, I will.”

“Fine. Now listen. I need you to stay with Keith. Don’t come to Ohio. I’ve got things under control. You need to keep an eye on Keith.” She took a deep breath. At least the lie was over. She had no idea about Keith. No flashes whatsoever. The only thing she saw in her head was J.S. dead if he came to Ohio, at least now. He needed to stay as far away from Rancey as possible. “Do you understand?”

J.S. sighed. “Okay.”

“I mean it.”

“I said okay, damn it!”

Rene smiled and stood up. “I’ll see you in a couple months.” She pushed the button on the receiver and ended the conversation. Staring at the wall, she thanked God, or whatever powers controlled destiny, if such a thing existed.

She walked back into the kitchen and hung up the telephone.

“Trouble?” her mother asked.

“Not really. Just a friend being a friend.” Rene sat down at the table, across from the woman who nurtured her for so many years, yet let her walk away without as much as a tear.

Too many questions burned on her tongue. Why didn't she just ask? What was there to be afraid of? Either her mother would answer them, or she could go elsewhere. Nothing said she had to stay with her mother. "Why didn't you leave him?"

"What?"

"My father. Why didn't you leave him?"

Her mother fiddled with the piece of paper in her hands, folded it into neat little squares, and shoved it into her sweater pocket. The sundress she was wearing had large red and blue exotic flowers laced with leafy bright green vines. The pattern seemed out-of-place, too flamboyant, too Hawaiian, for Cleveland. Her mother looked up. Her soft brown eyes held the same knowing sadness Rene saw in the past, a dip into her own soul. "Why didn't you leave Buddy? What did you think you could accomplish by staying with him?"

Rene leaned back in the chair and stared out the window. Rain ticked at the glass. The streets and sidewalks were turning slick, with a translucent layer of ice.

She remembered begging, pleading, "Stop. Don't go, not tonight. Stay with me." Visions of needles, PCP, stumbling through the darkness, a car stuck in the mud, hands shoving against the trunk and the bumper, slipping, falling, crushing tires, the weight of metal—it jarred her body, slamming her like fastballs, thrown one at a time.

Buddy smiled, his broad smile of the past, promising, full of future. "Sure, I'll always stay with you."

Rene felt tears well in her eyes. Too bad the words didn't match the reality. She turned back to her mother. "I understand." And she did, at last, or at least for the moment. She didn't know about tomorrow.

Chapter 27

Keith

“Come in!”

Keith opened the thick mahogany door and stepped inside. Brandy Adam’s office was much the way he recalled. French provincial, dark rose carpet, pink walls, and a script high-rise complex stacked around her. She looked different, though. Older. More retro. Her hair was striped gray and clipped close to the ears. She had turquoise earrings dangling from her lobes and was wearing a 60’s off-white gauze blouse with a square neckline and puffed sleeves.

The last time he saw her, over a year ago, her hair was jet black, and she wore leather mini-skirts. She was the type of woman most men wanted to bed. Not that he was interested. She was too dark for his tastes.

The telephone receiver was pinned between her shoulder and head. She squinted and shook her head, causing the free earring to sway.

Keith took a seat on the sofa. He glanced at the basket of potpourri sitting on the cherry table beside him. Cinnamon. Maybe a dash of vanilla. At first, he sat in the corner with his elbow propped on the wooden sofa arm, but he shifted to the center and folded his hands in his lap. He wanted to appear as casual as possible.

“Shit,” Brandy said to the person on other end of the line. “Either take the damned part or turn it down.” Silence. “I don’t give a flying fuck about what your sister-in-law says. Just make up your mind.” She spun toward Keith and tossed a hand up in what seemed an apologetic gesture. “Okay, whatever. Look, I have someone here, so I need to let you go. Call me later. Oh, and quit talking to your stupid ass sister-in-law!”

The telephone receiver hit the cradle. Her brown eyes fixed on him, moving from his head to his shoes and back again. “Sorry, my secretary’s out on maternity leave, and I can’t seem to keep temp help for more than a day or two.”

“No problem.” He didn’t care about the office help.

“So, tell me about yourself.”

“Excuse me?” Ten years as his agent, she ought to know.

“What have you been doing for the last year?”

“Living in Montana.”

“No movies, no plays, no nothing?”

“You’d know, wouldn’t you?” If he had, he would’ve contacted her, and she would’ve collected a commission for handling his contract.

Brandy rubbed her chin. Keith remembered when she first struck out on her own, moving away from Brandt and Hicks and setting up a small, one-room gig. She pleaded with him to stick with her. Now she was eyeing him like a fish she needed to toss.

“Well, you never know,” she said. “I thought you might have changed agents without letting me in on it, especially since our contract expired a few months back. Several of my male clients did when our legal ties ended, and I started looking my age.” Brandy laughed. It was the same high-pitched giggle with a rising endnote. “Apparently, they were more interested in trying to get me in the sack than seeing what I could do for them.”

Keith propped an ankle on his knee and brushed a speck of lint from his dress pants. “Personally, I don’t care what you look like.”

Brandy nodded and flicked her earring with a well-manicured nail. “I see.”

“I just want to get back into acting.”

“Okay, stand up.” She made an upward motion with her hand. “Let me have a look at you.”

“Didn’t you already check me over?”

Brandy clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes. “I wasn’t checking your butt out when you walked in the door, if that’s what you mean. I need to see how you developed while you were out in God’s country playing cowboy.”

“I wasn’t playing cowboy.” Keith stood and tucked in his shirt. “I own a ranch. I raise cattle.” He turned, letting her have a good look. “I did do some team roping during the first six months I was there, if it’s significant.” Not many people thought a movie star could master something as difficult as rodeo roping. But with help of a good team leader, as well as his competitive nature and quick learning ability, he advanced fast, taking on his first rodeo in less than a month.

“Pull off your shirt.”

Keith unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off. Too bad boredom ruined going for the Grand National Rodeo Championship. His interest in things waned as soon as he felt he mastered whatever skill they had to offer. Of course, his persistent need for new challenges was a blessing in terms of acting. He could play a variety of roles and gain the skills required for the part without stumbling. Then move on to the next. "Want me to flex a few muscles for you?"

"Nah, you look good." Brandy laughed again, longer. "Hell, if I were ten years, no, make that twenty years younger, I'd lay you, myself."

At least she hadn't lost her sense of humor. "Glad I meet your expectations."

"So what kind of part do you want?"

Pulling his shirt back on, he sat down on the sofa and propped his ankle back onto his knee, returning to the pose he had before the strip tease. "What's out there?"

Brandy tapped a few keys on the computer sitting on the edge of her desk. "There are a lot of parts in the February casting calls, mostly bit stuff, but I have to be honest with you." She turned to face him again. "I don't think you're going to get a leading role, and I think you already know why."

Keith grimaced. "Andrea." He wanted to add "the bitch bent on flushing me," but he didn't.

"You've got it. Although another hitch is how long you've been out of action, and nobody's going to be willing to take a chance on someone who bailed for the mountains at the first sign of trouble."

"I wouldn't call it bailing."

"Everyone else will."

His mind searched for any positive press coverage he might have to offset the situation. "What about the Unity Studios gala? Well, they didn't call it a gala. I think they referred to it as an All Star Party, but it went pretty well. I reconnected with a few people and talked with Rodney Durham. He might be interested in putting me in something."

"Almost got shot, too, at least from the ink I read." Brandy picked up a pencil and tapped it on the desk. "What did Penny Larkin do with it? She's still with you, isn't she?"

"Yes, she's still my publicist." Or at least he thought she was. Maybe he should take a swing by her office and see if she was still onboard. After the negative press started popping

up in the tabloids, she fell down a hole, disappeared for a while, but telephoned him a couple times after he moved to Whitefish.

“Get together with her, put out some spin, and think about this.” Brandy stopped for a few seconds, lacing her pencil through her fingers. “You need to get back together with Andrea, if for nothing more than a peace party.”

“I don’t want—”

“To coin an old phrase, you need to bury the hatchet with her. Otherwise, she’s going to be a hair up your ass, and you just don’t need that sort of shit following you around.”

Keith thought about it a moment. He needed to make some money. Not that he was broke. Far from it. But he was still in the position he had to let his accountant go and postpone hiring spring ranch hands.

Plus, he wanted to get back into acting. He didn’t need to spend any more time in Whitefish. The only reason he stayed as long as he did was because he thought Rene might come back. But she didn’t. And her lack of interest was obvious. Two months and not a single telephone call. Nothing. As far as he could tell, she was still in Ohio, although J.S. wouldn’t tell him a damned thing about what was happening with her, other than he shouldn’t get involved.

So why not hook up with Andrea, even if it was just for the sake of his career? Anyone with an IQ higher than a lamppost could tell she still wanted him. If not, she wouldn’t be so adamant about making his life miserable. Not to mention the jealousy she demonstrated. She came at Rene like a maddened hawk at the Unity party.

He loathed her, but they did have a few good times together, and if he meant a fresh start on his career, maybe he could tolerate her. He laced his fingers together, flipped his palms outward, and stretched. “Sure, no problem. I’ll work it out.”

Chapter 28

Rene

Rene stood at the kitchen counter, listening to the light scraping sounds of metal against metal as her mother mixed the last bowl of cornmeal masa. The pan in front of her held a dozen water-softened corn husks with flattened globs of masa and shredded chicken in the center of each husk. Her fingers worked with a precision she thought long forgotten. First, wrapping and overlapping the husks to form small packages. Then, tucking the ends under to create seams down the sides.

She finished one side of the pan and started up the other when the scraping sounds stopped, and footsteps trailed across the tile floor. A chair creaked, and a huff followed. "I'm getting too old for this," her mother said. "Soon, you'll be the one who does the cooking."

Rene's eyes flitted to her mother. Silver threads glistened through black hair drawn into a tight bun at the base of her skull. Skin pooled to slight paunches above her jaw-line. Faint cobweb lines etched the corners of her dark eyes. The sunflowers on her cotton dress nodded from beneath the yellow apron looped around her neck and tied securely at the waist.

She wished her emotions about her mother were as simple as cooking. If they were, she could arrange them, boil them, or at least make something productive out of them. They were there. She loved her at times. She felt glad to be around her at times. She even had fond memories of the times they shared while she was a child. But she always felt a coating of anger, resentment and abandonment that turned the good ingredients into mud.

Several moments passed, with only the steady plopping sounds of low boiling chicken, salsa and red sauce coming from the stove behind her, before her mother spoke again. "Your father always wanted to purchase a bigger home."

Rene shrugged. "So why didn't he?"

The house was nothing elaborate. But bigger than others in the general neighborhood. It was a large brick ranch positioned towards the front of a one acre lot. Her father had remodeled twice during the ten years she was gone. Once to add a large office to the back. Another to remove the wall between the kitchen and dining room. The kitchen now had natural oak cabinets sandwiching long tile countertops. Brass pots and pans hung from a rack at one

end with a cutting board beneath them. The walls were painted the color of field corn.

Everything was neat. Cleaned to a high mirror-polish. The shiny black appliances were new but the dark yellow utensils caddies standing at attention along the back of the countertops were remnants of the old kitchen.

“I didn’t want anything bigger,” her mother said. “I’m happy with what we have.”

One quick shove set the first pan of tamales aside and a pull brought the next pan forward. Rene retrieved the last bowl of masa. She found it hard to believe her father didn’t purchase a bigger home, or didn’t do anything, simply because her mother didn’t want him to.

“I didn’t stay with your father because of his money. I had no desire to live in a big house and drive a fancy car like Phil.”

Rene winced at the mention of her adoptive father’s name. She’d never heard her mother say anything negative about Phil. Of course, she never heard her mother talk about money beyond disgusted musings over the cost of things.

“I’m not saying Phil was a bad man. He wasn’t. He loved his family, and I always respected him for that. I just didn’t want that kind of life. I didn’t want it for you. I didn’t want it for myself. I didn’t want your father to think he needed to give it to us.” Her mother’s varicose veined hand fluttered in the air and swung around the kitchen. “Cooking. Cleaning. Taking care of people. These things make me happy. I could’ve done them for others. I didn’t stay because I couldn’t make my own way in the world.”

“Do you know how. . .” Rene hesitated, her spoon in mid-air. Biology. It was nothing more than biology. She dropped a dollop of masa into the softened corn husk. “. . .my father makes his money?” Another dollop followed.

Her mother’s lips stiffened. “Yes and no.”

Several more dollops fell into place while Rene mentally cursed herself for asking such a question. She should’ve known her mother wouldn’t give a straight answer. Admitting she knew what her husband did for a living would only make her life more difficult, make her, somehow, complicit.

“I know what your father does is illegal, if that’s what you’re trying to ask. I just don’t know the exact nature of what he does beyond what he sees fit to tell me.”

With more force than necessary, Rene flattened several piles of masa. “Surely, at some point, though, you realized he wouldn’t stop just because you didn’t want the money.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Her mother let out a deep sigh. “I wanted him to stop, but he didn’t, and I knew he wouldn’t, no matter how many times I told him I didn’t need the things he thought we needed. Somewhere he became too attracted to. . .no, it wasn’t just an attraction. . .he felt he needed the power.”

Rene turned to the stove and picked up the pan of shredded chicken, deliberately avoiding her mother’s eyes as she moved back to the counter. Her fingers reached for another spoon. A splatter of chicken fell into a flattened pile of masa. Several others followed with quick slops before she asked, “So why did you stay? If you knew he wouldn’t stop, no matter how much you told him you weren’t interested in the money, no matter how simple you insisted we live, why did you stay?”

“You asked me this before, the first day you arrived, and again, I ask you the same questions. Why did you stay with Buddy Hanes? Why did you turn your back on your family to be with a man you knew wasn’t good for you?”

Her eyes darted to her mother a moment, before she started wrapping the second pan of tamales. The questions both angered and hurt her. She knew why. Her mother was right. Even if her father deserved her anger, her mother didn’t, hadn’t, not when she’d refused to stop seeing Buddy, not when she knew the consequences of her refusal, not even later when she left Ohio and tried to erase her past. Her mother hadn’t hurt her any more than she’d hurt her mother. All over men who weren’t worth the time they invested in them.

She moved slowly as she wrapped the last tamale and retrieved the pan of red sauce from the stove. “I stayed with Buddy because I knew how his life would turn out without me. Because I thought I could change him, make his life better, make his pain go away. But. . .” She stopped and sat the pan down. “Also because somewhere, in all of that, I fell in love with him.”

“These are the same reasons I stayed with you father. I met him when I was young, in my last year of high school, at Longbow’s—the store at the edge of the reservation where your grandparents are now buried. And I knew, or at least thought I knew, I could make a good man out of him.”

“No.” Rene shook her head. “It isn’t the same. We may have both felt the same way in the beginning, but I didn’t stay after I realized he wouldn’t change, that he didn’t want to change. I walked away from him.” The rest of the words hung in her mouth. She wanted to say she regretted it. She regretted knowing him, regretted leaving her family for him, and regretted walking away from him. She regretted all of it.

“I understand,” her mother said. “Probably more than you think.”

Did she? Did her mother have the same gifts, the same curses? Did she see the same things? They’d never talked about the subject. How could they? She hadn’t even gotten any flashes or visions. Not until Buddy. And even those were different. They weren’t about the things he’d done. They were about what he’d experienced, what made his life miserable. Except for the warning flashes. She’d known what was about to happen to him, his immediate future. Just not enough to save him. Not enough to prevent his death. Or could she have?

She frowned and poured the red sauce across the tamales before turning to watch her mother slide her wedding band to her knuckle and back to the indentation at the base of her finger.

“We each made our choices,” her mother said. “But some choices can’t be undone. They become part of us, part of our identity. We can’t walk away from them. Not really.”

Yes, Rene thought. The past was static. She couldn’t change Buddy’s death. She couldn’t change the crimes she committed. She couldn’t change the families who raised her. Even if she hid in the mountains, even if she led the most exemplary life she could, even if she did what Agent Rancey wanted, her past would always be there.

Her mother thrummed her fingers on the table in a steady, yet impatient, rhythm. “Jake understands. He shares the same identity.”

“Jake wants to kill me.”

One of her mother’s eyebrows sprung into a high arch. “Are you certain?”

No, she wasn’t. Rancey said it was so. She was pretty certain it was so. But she couldn’t say with absolute sureness. “You may not know why Jake—”

“I know more than you think. I know about the agent. I know your father sent Jake to take care of things. I just didn’t know—”

“Then you know enough to know it only makes sense. Jake wouldn’t have gone to Montana if he hadn’t wanted to kill me. He would’ve stayed in Ohio.”

“But he didn’t.”

No, he didn’t, and Rene wondered why. She’d seen her father’s will. If Jake killed her, he would inherit everything. So why not just do it and be done with it?

“Not yet,” she said.

Her mother blinked. “I know him, and I know he won’t.”

“If you say so,” she said.

The kitchen sounds swallowed them. Rene grabbed the stopper from the back of the sink and pushed it into the drain. A squirt of dish soap, a flip of the handle, and hot water sprayed the waiting dishes.

“Love is an odd thing,” her mother said.

“I know,” she replied, even though she didn’t. For her, love was more than odd. It amounted to one man who didn’t love her enough to stay alive, and another who joined hands with her father.

“Did you know Jake’s first wife looks like you?”

“No, I didn’t.” She didn’t even know Jake had more than one wife. She didn’t care.

“Susan Ramsey. Do you remember her?”

She squinted, as if squinting would somehow conjure up a picture of the unknown woman. “No, should I?”

“I suppose not.” Her mother’s eyes wandered to the window and the bare maple tree, its branches bending against the winter wind. “I just thought if you knew her, you might recognize how much she resembles you.”

Rene pulled the grated cheese from the refrigerator and sprinkled it across the top of the tamales. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Their marriage was over before Jake worked for your father.” Her mother stopped as the pans slid into the oven. “Check the temperate.”

Rene reached for the dial. Three hundred degrees. “It’s set.”

“I saw pictures of both of them, though.”

“You mean Jake and his ex-wife?” Her teeth met her bottom lip. How could she be so stupid? Asking a question, any question, implied interest, and she didn’t have any, didn’t want to have any.

“No, I meant both of Jake’s wives. His second wife was Julie Parks. Do you know her?”

Rene shook her head. She didn’t like the direction the conversation was going. It was going the same as most discussions they’d had over the last several weeks. Always about Jake. Always about what Jake did. Always about what Jake liked. Always about how her mother and Jake got along. “You know we didn’t stay in touch.”

“Julie looked like you, too.”

She blinked. One ex-wife who resembled her might be a coincidence. But two?

“He dates a lot of women.” Her mother’s eyes met hers. “They all look like you.”

Her stomach cinched. Why? “That doesn’t seem. . .”

“Possible?”

“Yes, it doesn’t seem possible.”

“Like I said, love is an odd thing.”

Rene sat down across from her mother. Her eyes wandered to the window and the frost lacing inward from the edges of the aluminum casing. “I know,” she said, but she still didn’t.

Chapter 29

Jake

Jake stood and walked to the tinted window in the waiting room. Vinyl couches and chairs lined the walls. A hallway led to the cafeteria and connecting hallways. He was sick of hospitals. They either smelled like Lysol or shitty bedpans.

The sky was overcast. The parking lot was packed full. People were moving to and from their cars like ants, steady, but not rushed, with packages and an occasional plant or flower arrangement in their hands. Jake wondered whether they were checking in, leaving or just visiting. Probably a combination of the three, but he couldn't tell which based on what they were carrying. He didn't even know why he cared, or would think about it. Well, that wasn't true. He needed to get his mind off Gar, and how much longer things were going to take.

No one thought Gar would hang on this long, not strapped to a respirator with his heart running at a weak blip. Four days a week pacing the brown and orange carpet wasn't productive. Not to mention the nights stretched out flat on his back in the waiting room with his coat shoved under his head and the cushion edges jabbing him in the ass. Multiply the days by the two and a half months since Gar's admission, and he had forty-two days of wasted time. Days he could use elsewhere, for straightening out the mess created by Gar's absence.

Even worse, Gar seemed to think he could run the business from a hospital bed. He couldn't. Intakes were piling up, and distribution points were running out of stock. Everybody was bitching. People thought illegal businesses ran different. They were wrong. Services slowed and products came to a standstill without supervision. Gar had a number of old-timers on the crew, but none of them seemed to have the strength, or maybe the ambition, to keep things going.

Oh, well, he'd be in charge soon enough. Then he could run the business however he wanted. And he preferred making money. Not that Gar didn't. Gar was a good mentor when it came to finagling something seemingly insignificant, like food stamps, into big dollars. What a scam the stamps turned out to be. People couldn't get their hands on them fast enough, and the profits mounted into the upper six digit zone.

In a way, Jake felt sad to see Gar go. But in another way, he was glad. The business needed to change hands, needed fresh ideas to survive. Plus, Gar's obsession with personal vendettas, like Rene, was tiresome.

Jake turned back to the waiting room. Rene sat against the pale green wall with her legs crossed and a hard look on her face. Her fingers pinched the page corner of what appeared to be a grocery store checkout line magazine. A poster hung above her head, showing a family of four—two kids, a mother and a father—with the slogan, “You can depend on us” looped across the top in cursive with Lutheran Hospital printed in thick letters at the bottom.

A swoosh came from the cushion as he took a seat beside her. The wooden arms of the chair bothered his elbows. The thought of asking the question he needed to ask made him feel uncomfortable. He coughed to clear his throat. “I was wondering if you'd like to go out to dinner with me?”

Rene glanced up. Her gray eyes held a question mark.

Jake looked away, focusing on the lamp beside her positioned in the center of a metal and veneer end table. “What would it hurt?”

“I suppose it wouldn't hurt anything. I'm just wondering why the sudden change. I've been here how long? And you haven't said a word to me. Now you're interested in taking me out to dinner. Why?”

Jake laughed. Pure Rene. Direct to the core. “Well, if you must know, it's my birthday, and I don't have a date. I've been too tied up lately to do much of anything.” He shrugged. “Anyway, I thought you might be willing to escort me for the evening. Maybe for old time's sake?”

Rene glanced the magazine and frowned. “Birthday, huh?”

“March 25th. All day.” He wondered if she remembered the significance, the first time they made love. No, he couldn't call it love. It was sex. The love part didn't come until later.

“Sure. Why not?” She threw the magazine aside, a little more than a toss, more like a forceful pitch that sent the slick pages sliding across the carpet, fluttering open, and flapping like a wounded bird. The action surprised him.

“Should I pick you up around eight?” he asked.

Rene stood up, looking him for a minute before pulling her coat from the chair. “Yes, I should be back by then. I mean, back to my mother’s house. I don’t plan on coming back here, not today, maybe tomorrow.” She tugged her coat on.

“Where are you headed?”

“Why?” Rene pulled her hair out from inside her coat collar and let it fall down her back.

“No reason. I was just wondering. You seem a little upset.”

“No place in particular.” She stood there a moment, her eyes moving to the magazine on the floor before she looked at him again. “You said around eight?”

“Yes, we’ll go someplace nice, maybe Sconelli’s?” He wondered if she would remember. It was the place he took her on their first date, or at least the first official date. They went out dozens of times beforehand for burgers and fries after they finished a job, but those didn’t count. She did the same with everybody.

A smile came to the corner of her mouth. “Okay, I’ll dress up then.”

Rene walked toward the elevators. Jake’s eyes followed her with interest. The sway of her hips, the strong way she walked, the fine silk strands of hair swinging against her back. He was surprised she accepted his invitation. Especially after the reason he gave her. Not that it changed much. He still had a job to do, even if he didn’t like doing it, didn’t like Gar ordering him to do it.

A telephone sat on the table beside him. He picked it up and punched out a number. A calm baritone voice answered. “It’s your quarter.”

“She just left.”

“Okay.”

“I’m taking her to dinner tonight at Sconelli’s on Fifth Street. I’m supposed to pick her up around eight, and we should be there no later than nine.”

The line went dead. Jake hung up and bent down to pick up the magazine. The slick paper bothered his fingers. *Entertainment Hollywood*. A classic. He flipped the pages back to the cover. A picture of Keith North glared from the front page. Andrea Kandet had her arm looped through North’s, and the title read, *America’s Sweethearts Reunite*.

Ah, that would explain. Jake placed the magazine on the table and stared at the checkered pattern in the carpet. He didn’t like the feeling he had. It felt like fourteen years gone black.

Chapter 30

Rene

Rene sat on the ground and let her fingers trace the chiseled letters. *Buddy Edward Hanes, 1954-1974*. The brown marble felt cold. The rectangle set level in the ground, rimmed in brass. His death was so long ago. She'd nearly gotten over it until she met Keith. Different mannerism or not, he reminded her of Buddy so hard it hurt. Just seeing him, listening to him, being around him—overwhelmed her with memories. She thought leaving Montana would let her escape the constant reminders. She was wrong. Being in Ohio only made things worse. It wrapped her in the past.

Maybe she could learn to forget again. Maybe once her father died, she could sell the t-shirt shop and go somewhere else.

She shook her head. No, that wouldn't work. It wouldn't eliminate the flashes. They were ingrained in her. But why Buddy? Why was he the first? The only premonitions she'd gotten before him were just bits and pieces. Things she could easily write off as fluke instinct, female intuition, coincidence. Nothing remotely psychic. So what if she'd never met him? What if she hadn't gotten that very first flash? What if he hadn't died? What if. . .

She sighed. What if wasn't going to change anything. What if didn't exist. She needed to quit thinking about what if. The past was the past, and no amount of what ifs could change what happened.

The wind blew and flattened white petals from the cherry tree above her fell across her. She leaned back and stared at the sky. The March earth seeped wetness beneath her as her mind took a course of its own, wavering back to June 1974. She could see Buddy standing in front of Casana's, his hands shoved in his pockets, and his cigarettes rolled up in his t-shirt sleeve, in that 50's style he loved so much. He had a bottle of Little King Cream Ale in his hand, the translucent green glass reflecting the red neon sign above him. The small overlap of his two front teeth cracked through his broad smile when she pulled up beside him.

His head popped through the passenger window, blonde hair tousled, blue eyes smiling. "Hey, babe, where you going?"

She laughed. “Nowhere and everywhere.” She reached up and pulled her hair around her shoulder, letting it spill across her chest.

“Sounds like the exact place I need to be.” His body slid into the passenger seat.

The deuce flew down the road, cutting the city corners, headed for the country. The cool late night wind smacked at their faces and whipped their hair. Her eyes darted away from the road to watch Buddy put his thumb firmly over the mouth of his Little King. Securely in fourth, she pulled her hand away from the gearshift to grab the bottle. “Let me have some.”

“Oh no, you don’t.” His arm fell across the back of the seat. The bottle was behind her, taunting her with its closeness. “You’re too young for that shit.”

“Phil lets me drink. He’s let me ever since I turned eighteen. You know that.”

“I’m not Phil, and this isn’t that weak three-two legal shit Phil lets you drink.” Buddy’s free hand ran up her bare leg, dipping beneath the edge of her shorts while she alternated between trying to reach behind her to grab the bottle and pushing his hand away. They were both laughing. “I love you, babe,” he kept saying the refrain until it turned into a song he belted in tenor at the top of his lungs.

Rene tugged him closer, one hand wrapped tight around the steering wheel, the other pulling at his arm. He slid over and put his arm around her, ending his song with a soft whisper to her ear, “Forever, babe. Forever and ever.”

His lips traveled from her ear to her neck and then back to her earlobe. Her skin shivered. Wisps of hair rippled across her body. She stopped the car. The road was deserted, no houses for two or three miles either direction, only the shriek of a lone nighthawk swooping the fields. Her arms went around his neck. Their mouths met with such force her body felt engulfed, arson torched, so good it felt illegal.

Buddy shifted the Little King to his other hand. His thumb slipped off. The emerald bottle tumbled downward, spilling lighter fluid across the floorboard. The smell bit at her nose and filled the car with a suffocating high. Buddy pulled his hands away from her to fumble at his feet.

The blood vessels in her forehead tighten. Her stomach rolled at the stench consuming her. “Get out! Just get out of my car! I told you not to bring that stuff around me. I hate watching you huff your brains out.”

“What? Wait a minute, babe. I can explain.”

“I don’t want to hear any more of your explanations. It’s simple. That crap’s gonna kill you. But if you don’t wanna listen, if you wanna keep on doing it, fine. Do it. Just don’t expect me to watch.” Rene reached across him, pulled the door handle, and shoved him out of the car. The bottle followed with a forceful arch sending fluid in the air, across his face.

The last thing she remembered was shouting, “I don’t want to see you ever again, do you hear me? Just stay out of my life!” And she sped off, leaving him by the roadside.

Afterwards, she refused to take any of his telephone calls, threw up a wall of Phil’s men around her to make sure he stayed away.

A week later, he died. No, he rammed his car into a telephone pole. Not a single brake mark. And fifteen years later, she still felt culpable. Responsible for not being there, for not letting the mental flashes flood her and give her the premonitions of his death, for not stopping him, for not doing anything but leaving. Why did she feel responsible? He killed himself. She didn’t kill him.

Yet, she was the one who couldn’t bring herself to love another man. Not Jake, not enough to stay. Not Pete, not even after they married. Not Keith. No one except J.S., and J.S. was a brother, not a lover. He was someone who shared the same guilt, someone who came with Buddy, before she rotted in moss-covered sadness.

Rene jumped up and kicked the ground at the base of the headstone. The toe of her tennis shoe buried into the earth and came back out soaked in mud. Water drops fell from the cherry leaves above her. She yelled, “Are you ever going to get the hell out of my life?”

She stood with her fists clenched at her sides, her breathing short and fast, her cheeks cold with tears. She wiped at the side of her face. She felt stupid, angry. Why was she shouting at a dead man? He couldn’t hear her any more than the marble that marked his body.

With a shake of her head, she looked away. Her eyes skirted across the vine-covered wall running along the front of the cemetery to the stone caretaker’s house, to the neatly trimmed grass between the gravesite and the road. Two men stood a hundred or so feet away, near a poplar tree. They looked like boxers. Big. Burly. Broad shoulders pushing against their suit jackets.

One had his hefty hips propped against a black Ford. He was staring at the cigar in his hand. He took a draw and tapped the ash onto the ground. She recognized the smell. Swisher Sweet. The same brand Phil used to smoke. Her clothing and hair were damp from the spring mist hanging in the air, as though the smoke could permeate them and stay with her, sucked into the wetness.

The other had his head down and his hat in his hands, his feet firmly planted beside a pink-flowering peony bush, his eyes fixed on the ground. Squinting, Rene realized he was at Phil's gravesite, or at least what she thought to be Phil's gravesite. She hadn't visited it since the funeral, but she recalled thinking how odd it was Phil had chosen a plot so close to Buddy's, as if he wanted to make sure she'd visit both of them when she came back to Ohio, like he knew she would someday.

Maybe the men were part of Phil's old crew, paying him a visit. Although she thought their reaction to her temper fit odd. Most people would gawk and wonder what overtook her.

Rene brushed at the backside of her jeans. Mud followed her palms. She walked toward them in an even gait until the man leaning against the car looked up. Their eyes met. Her body turned to plaster. Her feet wouldn't move. Images of great gaping slashes across necks, twisted heads, ropes pulled tight, duct tape flattened against mouths, bullets striking bodies, bombarded her.

Her heart raced. No matter what Phil was, he didn't associate with people who committed so many murders.

Rene turned toward her mother's car. At first, she moved slow, but steady. Then, when the man tossed his cigar down and the other man at the gravesite looked up, she started running. Her fingers fumbled in her coat pocket for the car keys. She yanked the door open. It slapped against the hinges, sprung back, and slammed her the rest of the way into the car. She shoved the key in the ignition. Her foot stomped on the accelerator. The car choked, and she cursed her mother for buying a Ford Escort. It would never outrun the LTD. It jerked its way through the wrought-iron gate at the entrance of the cemetery.

The two-lane highway was vacant. A lone farmhouse sat off in the distance, down a dirt lane. The LTD pulled up beside her and weaved across the yellow line.

Rene glanced over, and a lump rose to her throat as she watched the men argue, their fat pulpy lips moving. The driver waved something black. A gun? The passenger rolled his window down and motioned her to pull over. She didn't. They cut her off, and she careened into a ditch, the nose of the Escort arrowed downward.

Her head lulled back against the headrest. She shook her head, trying to clear the blow away. The driver's door jerked open. The burly man with a scar running from his forehead down the side of his face shoved his head inside. "Why the hell were you running?"

Rene put on her best defiant voice. "Why the hell were you following me?"

Letting these men get the upper hand was out-of-the-question. She reached for her purse, hoping the can of mace was still in the front pocket. Crap, crap, crap, knives, guns, ropes, electric wires, screaming, begging, clubs, beatings, death, death, death. Her mind was going berserk.

The man swiped at his bulbous nose, making the widened pours on the end more predominant. "We aren't going to hurt you. We just want to talk with you. There's no harm in that, is there?"

Rene slid toward the passenger door, pinned shut by the ditch wall. There was no way to crawl out without him grabbing hold of her.

"It's like this," he said. "We're not here to kill you."

Her fingers kept searching for her purse behind her. She didn't care what the guy said. He was a killer. Her flashes might not have warned her of any danger ahead of time like they should've, like she needed them to, but if nothing else, they guaranteed the man reaching across the seat for her was a killer.

"Stop!" The man grabbed her purse. "Don't do anything stupid. You don't want to piss me off, do you?"

No, she didn't, but she wasn't going say it. Her hands were shaking. She clamped them together. She couldn't stop the flashes in her head from pouring over her like thick, sticky tar.

"Look," the man said as he reached inside his jacket.

Rene shielded her face. A gun? A knife? How was she going to die?

His square hand shoved a tape recorder with a small mike and a long wire attached to it into her face. “Wherever you go, wear this, or something like it. Tape it to your body. Make sure you change the tape every hour and a half. Got it?”

Rene stared at the square black box, but didn’t take it. Her eyes were as wide as a full moon, desperate to throw light across the darkness.

He dropped it in her lap. “When you run into Agent Rancey again, make sure you’re wearing the recorder and turn it on. Ask him about the Matero family. If that doesn’t make him blow, tell him you know about the two mil he owes them and the money he’s trying to extort. You may wind up. . .” The man hesitated. A bead of sweat wriggled down his forehead. “We’ll make sure you don’t wind up dead, okay?”

Rene nodded again. Her tongue liquefied, lapping around in her mouth, unable to form a syllable.

The man moved closer. She could smell the cigar smoke on his breath. He tossed her purse onto the back seat. “I know you’re scared, but you need to do this. It’s important, and it may save your ass down the road. Do you understand?”

Rene wanted to ask him why. Why she had to be the one to wear the recorder, why they didn’t just take care of Rancey themselves? But all she could do was nod. The man strode back to the car while she watched, her body still shaking.

The black Ford sped off, and afterwards, she fell across the seat. Sobs came in gasps. Her thoughts darted back to the graveyard. The men were standing at Phil’s grave. She was sure of that. So how were they connected to Phil? And why did they care about what happened between her and Rancey? She needed to find out more about the Matero family, and fast. Or did it matter? She looked at the recorder. It seemed like such a simple device.

Chapter 31

Keith

Keith took another drink of scotch as he listened to Andrea prattle. They were at Shirato's, the place to be seen if one wanted to be seen on Canyon Boulevard off Sunset Strip. White linen covered tables and wrought-iron chairs filled the open-air dining area. A canvas canopy lapped overhead. A collection of imported olive trees rimmed the perimeter of the patio. The restaurant held a dozen celebrities sprinkled among an assortment of Hollywood executives, directors, producers, agents, and publicists. Many who he knew in some form or another.

Andrea was sitting across from him, picking at her pasta puttanesca, with an irritated look on her face. She put down her fork. "I told them light garlic. I don't know why they can't get it right. It isn't like this is some sloppy spaghetti house, for God's sake." Her hand shot up. "Waiter!"

A waiter, with a white linen napkin draped over his arm, came to the table and gave a cautious smile. "Yes, Ms. Kandet?" His eyes darted to Keith. "What can I do for you?"

Andrea's voice rose. "I told you light garlic, and what did you bring me? A plate of garlic laden crap. That's what you brought me. Now take it back, and tell the chef to get it right." She waved her hand at the plate in a dismissive gesture. "This place has certainly gone downhill. It used to be a person could get a decent meal here."

The waiter mumbled an apology and whisked the offending plate away. Several people around them stared a moment and then tittered behind their hands. Andrea turned to Keith and brushed a red curl from her face. "I don't see how you can eat that."

Keith shrugged. "Actually, it's pretty good. You're just picky."

"Picky? I don't know what makes you say that. Why, just the other night when we ate at Denari's, I didn't have a bit of trouble with the linguini."

"You sent the chocolate mousse back how many times?"

Her nose flared. "It needed to be chilled, not room temperature." Her voice shot up again. "Besides, taking the side of a chef over me isn't what I would expect. You need to be a little more supportive, don't you think?"

Keith pulled the napkin from his lap and placed it on the table. People on the sidewalk were now staring, pulling their cameras out. “We could’ve stayed at the house and had Mrs. Bumble cook for us. She’s much more equipped to make custom meals.”

Andrea rolled her eyes. “Quite frankly, Keith, you need to get some decent kitchen help. An old black woman from Alabama just doesn’t get it. And where in the world did you get that driver of yours? He looks like he just came in from the fields. What kind of name is J.S., anyway? Sounds like some kind of cheap whiskey, or that scotch you drink.”

Keith’s teeth met his tongue. Shirato’s wasn’t the place to get into an argument. Andrea made a decent scene, just as he thought she would, and mental gossip notes were already compiling. Tomorrow, the conversation would spread throughout Century City and move outward from there. But he needed to be careful. Displaying anything other than a patient, understanding demeanor wouldn’t benefit him. “Next time, you pick the restaurant. Then perhaps we’ll get better service.”

Andrea tugged at the gold chain around her neck. “Okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get snippy, but you know how upset I’ve been about my contract for the Klinegan film with Merrimont. They keep price cutting me. Like I’m a hack actor. Two low-level box office runs, and already they act like I’m history.”

“Half a million isn’t a shabby figure.”

“I drew a million on my last film, and this is a better director. You know he is. The movie is a guaranteed success. Why else would you be interested in signing onto one of his projects?” Andrea glanced away. She gave a small flip of her chin. The early afternoon sun started to edge across their table. “Oh, look, isn’t that your favorite paparazzi?”

Keith followed the direction of her gaze. Frank Starz stood across the street with a camera telescoped. Good, he hoped Starz got a shot of Andrea’s fit. “Scarcely. He’s more interested in making the news than reporting it.”

Andrea sighed. “You’re right. It’s history. I shouldn’t have pointed him out.”

“Yes, let’s talk about something else.” If only dropping the subject was possible. Nothing suited Andrea more than picking at scabbed wounds.

The waiter returned with a new plate of pasta. “The chef sends his apologies and asks if you’d try this to see if it’s to your liking.”

Andrea took a small taste and wrinkled her nose. “It’s acceptable. Not good, but I’m starved now that I’ve waited so long. Tell the chef he still needs to cut the garlic in half the next time I come here.”

“Yes, Ms. Kandet, I’ll certainly tell him.” The waiter’s eyes remained calm, but Keith noted the slight twitch to his lips.

“I hate to trouble you,” Keith said. “But could you bring me another scotch?”

The waiter smiled. “Certainly.”

“Make that a double.”

Andrea said. “How many does that make? Four? Five?”

The waiter hesitated. Keith smiled and nodded him on. “Since when has my drinking become your concern? It’s not like we’re engaged any more.”

“Well, yes.” Andrea spun her pasta around her fork. “Don’t you think it’s time we correct that?”

“Correct what?”

She took a small bite before she placed her fork down and focused on him. “Our engagement announcement. The press is going to expect it. After all, we were on the verge of marriage before we split.”

“You were the one who broke it off.” He wanted to add, “and did your best to screw up my career.” There were times over the last month he wanted to ask why she did it, why she thought their split so devastating she needed to manipulate whoever she could just to get rid of him. Then he listened to her and realized he already knew the answer. Her bitterness showed like a flashing neon sign. Not just at him, although she certainly directed part of her anger at him. But she seemed bent on alienating herself from the people who created her—her agent, her publicist, directors, producers, studios, whoever she could wag her sharp little tongue at.

Andrea reached up and tugged at her pearl earring, the set of earrings he gave her as a birthday present after they got engaged. Her finger bore their engagement ring, even though he hadn’t proposed to her again.

The waiter reappeared with his drink and placed it on the table with a smile.

Keith said, “Thank you,” before he returned to his conversation with Andrea. “You know I need to line something up and start bringing in some money before I can consider recommitting. It just wouldn’t look right. Me, being with you, when I’m nearly destitute.”

“Destitute?” Andrea laughed, her laughter arching to a high pitch. “You’ve never been poor a day in your life. I’m the one who came from the slums.”

Keith had to stop himself from snorting. To Andrea, poor meant coming from an upper middle-class family in Iowa. Her father was the CEO of a small manufacturing company, and both of her parents were pleasant. How they raised a child like Andrea was beyond him. Well, perhaps not. Andrea wasn’t always this demanding. When they first met, she was young, cute in a naive sort of way that made her attractive, set her out on the screen.

“We all have our burdens,” he said.

“Some of us overcome them.”

“True.”

“Did you talk with Edward Pance yet? I hear Brent Collins bailed on his contract—something about a major surgery. Knowing him, it’s probably a face lift. I heard he’s getting a bit vain. I suppose we all do once we hit a certain age, though.” A thoughtful expression crossed her face for several seconds before she smiled and waved at someone standing at the front door—a young woman with straight, almost white, hair who looked thin enough to slip through a keyhole. “Anyway, they need someone with a name to take his place on short notice.”

“I’ll considered it.”

“I thought you’d be interested in working with Merrimont Productions.”

“They seem awfully small.”

Andrea picked up her iced tea and glared at him. “I don’t consider them small. If I did, I wouldn’t even consider negotiating a contract with them for the Klinegan film. They’ve won three Independent Film Awards.”

Keith shrugged. “It’s different with you. They wouldn’t consider putting you in a lesser project.”

A strand of red hair fell, curling against her cheek, and her face softened. “Dear, you’ve already won an Independent Film Award. Everyone knows you’re a good actor. But we both

know how this business works. A year out of the loop and no one remembers you.” Her well-manicured fingers swirled the lemon slice in her iced tea. “Your award might attract Merrimont, though. You really should go over and check on the spot.” She stopped swirling, leaned forward, and placed her chin in his hands. “I’ll even drop a call for you. Perhaps I can trade their pathetic excuse for a contract on the Klinegan film to get you off the ground.”

“I’m looking for a lead part.” His agent said it wasn’t possible, but he thought Andrea might be able to pull it off if she set her mind to it. Being with her did have its advantages, in more ways than one.

“It *is* a lead part.”

Keith smiled at her, a deliberate impish smile. “Well, perhaps I’ll just have to give you a little more of what I did last night.” He knew he satisfied her, put her over the edge, clawing at the sheets, first asking, then begging for more. Not that it was difficult. He already knew what triggered such a response from her.

Andrea blushed. “It was wonderful, wasn’t it? You’ve always had a way with. . .”

Keith focused his attention on the slight cleavage exposed by the open buttons of her blouse. “It’s easy with you.” Too easy, he thought. Boring might be a better word. His thoughts ran across Rene. How she resisted him, made him work to gain her attention.

His eyes drifted back to the sidewalk across the street. Frank Starz was gone now. He wondered if this was what his life was meant to be. Well, at least Andrea was beginning to come around. Another month or two and they should be back where they left off.

Chapter 32

Rene

Rene ran out the front door, letting it bang behind her. First, three hours spent walking back to the cemetery to use the telephone and getting a tow truck to pull her mother's car out of the ditch. Then, coming home to find her mother's note lying on the kitchen table, scrawled in a combination of cursive and block letters, telling her to come back to the hospital. The request could only mean one of two things—her father had another setback, or he was dead.

She didn't care one way or another about her father. She only cared about her mother. Not at first. Coming back to Ohio was purely for Rancey. No, that wasn't correct. She also came back for personal reasons. She wanted to witness her father's death.

Every time she stood in his room, watching him gasp for breath as his heart struggled to take another beat, she felt a piece of granite chip away from the boulder of rejection and hatred, and crumble to the insignificant pebbles it was, or should've been. In a sense, his death was connected to her situation with Rancey. If her father died, her deal with Rancey would reduce to a freckle, a mere fleck on her arm. One down. One to go. Maybe she could talk some sense into Jake. If not, she could either convince Rancey that Jake didn't trust her enough to let her inside. If that failed, she could shoulder the consequences. The idea of going to prison didn't bother her as much as she thought it would.

Hours passed as she sat in the hospital waiting room, or stood staring out the window, while she fantasized how Rancey might cough up a suitable charge and play out her arrest. Sick thinking, she realized, but nonetheless amusing, a smile during an otherwise dull moment.

Her mother didn't enter her thoughts until later, maybe two months after she arrived. At first, her sole intention was to keep both J.S. and herself out of prison. But things changed. She and her mother shared time, lived in the same house again, and started rekindling a relationship. They had a lot to step around, but they managed. As the snow melted and spring arrived, she and her mother restarted.

Now, her thoughts focused on helping her mother more than helping herself. The car keys felt cold in her hand as she shoved one into the ignition. Start! She pumped the gas pedal and beat her fist on the dashboard.

The car was a piece of crap. She wondered why her mother didn't drive her father's Towncar rather than letting it sit in the garage, rubber tires rotting. Surely, the Towncar ran better. Her father had enough sense to maintain his Lincoln, even if he let her mother's car slide.

Holding the accelerator to the floor, she hit the key again and the engine cranked over. There. Just flooded.

Rene popped the gearshift in reverse and looked behind her. Right then, a white Ford Taurus pulled up and blocked the end of the driveway. Now what?

Rancey jumped out. Great! Just what she needed. Another Rancey lecture.

Rene swung around in her seat. The three-panel garage door was in front of her. A tree blocked her right, and a lamppost her left. She sighed and put the gearshift in park. Even if she wanted to run, she couldn't. Rancey was already on her, his fist beating on the window.

Her eyes drifted to her purse. Could she get her hands on the tape recorder? She grabbed her purse, reached inside, and hit the button before she rolled down the window. "What do you want now?" she demanded in an irritated tone.

Rancey leaned against the door, blocking her exit. "I want to know what you have for me, the information you've collected so far."

"What do you mean? What do you want me to have for you? A list of illegal things Jake is doing so you can toss him in prison without doing any work yourself?"

"Something like that."

"Well, excuse me, but I've been kind of busy dealing with my father's hospitalization. Don't you think it's more important we get him out of the picture before we start focusing on Jake?"

Rancey squinted at her. His cold blue eyes beaded. "We already know that isn't what's happening."

Rene didn't say anything. How could she? She didn't even understand what he was talking about.

“Dating Jake isn’t going to solve your problems.”

“I’m not dating Jake,” she said, even though she knew it wasn’t true. Well, maybe it was. One invitation to dinner scarcely amounted to dating. Although she couldn’t say she hadn’t thought about how much better things might work out if she took her mother’s advice and reconsidered Jake.

Keith obviously wasn’t interested. That is, if he was ever interested beyond getting her in the sack. It wasn’t like his word counted for much. He was already back together with Andrea Kandet—a woman he said he hated.

Whereas, Jake wanted more. He understood her situation, was part of her family, held part of her history, still loved her. And she knew it.

Rancey’s hand snaked inside his coat pocket to produce a cassette tape. “We bugged the waiting room.”

“So?”

“We also bugged the waiting room telephone.”

“Is there a point here, Agent Rancey? If not, I really need to get to the hospital. I’m sure you already know my father had some type of setback. It may not mean much to you, but I’d like to be with my mother when he dies.”

Rancey took a step back and tossed the cassette tape into her lap. “Before you get any misconceptions about Batella, perhaps should listen to this.”

Rene tossed the tape onto the passenger seat, waited for Rancey to pull away, dropped the car in gear, and took off. “Shit!” she shouted. She knew she needed to quit shouting curse words at herself, or even thinking them. They weren’t productive. They didn’t help her peg off the odometer stress needle. Nothing could. The last three months were bad enough, but today? In less than twelve hours, the man she had feelings for showed up in a tabloid with someone else, her former lover—who she thought was trying to kill her—asked her out, two thugs chased her down and gave her a tape recorder, her mother left her a note to rush to the hospital, and Rancey showed up.

Oh, great. A traffic jam. She glanced at her watch. 5:23 p.m. No wonder the freeway was backed up. She should’ve taken the side streets.

The cassette tape was now on the floorboard where it slid when she took the ramp onto the interstate. It was amazing such a junk car could get up enough speed to toss a piece of plastic. Curious, she scooped the cassette up from the floor and shoved it into the tape player.

Static. Then voices. She felt the blood draining from her face. Two seconds passed to bring her to the end of the tape and cause her to yank it from the player and throw it against the windshield. It bounced back and hit her on the shoulder.

“Fine!” She grabbed the tape and shoved it into her purse. The man didn’t specifically say he was hired for a hit. In fact, he didn’t say anything at all after Jake gave him the name of the place he planned to take her for dinner. Well, Jake didn’t even mention her name, but the meaning behind the call was obvious, even to an idiot.

Rene tightened her grip on the steering wheel. She wanted to hit, kick or yell at something. But what would be the point? Jake wanted her dead. That much was clear when they were in Montana, so why should the news surprise her now?

The traffic broke free, and Rene mashed the gas pedal to the floor. She darted between cars, cutting people off, getting a few horns honked and obscene gestures thrown her way. She knew why the information bothered her. Birthday. Only a squid would use a line like that, knowing she would associate the invitation with the first time they made love. No, the first time they had sex. There was no love involved in the act. She had to keep her mind focused on that. No love. No caring whatsoever.

Rene couldn’t believe she fell for his eyes. Brown, unwavering, the only reason she thought she would be safe with him. She didn’t see any murders. No images flashed through her head when she looked at him. Nothing horrendous, but his eyes had to be lying. He must be like Rancey. No remorse for the violence he committed. Maybe he just ordered the hits and didn’t have the direct visual contact she needed in order to see them in his eyes. Whatever it was, something covered his thoughts, hid what he did, and made him seem innocent.

She whipped the car into the first parking space she found at the hospital. Her footsteps fell hard, heavy, and full of anger as she made her way through the lobby to the elevators. She hit the button with her fist.

If hardball was what Jake wanted to play, he just got it. She needed to get more cassette tapes. From now on, she was going to wear the recorder everywhere, tape everything, and just let the mob and the Bureau sort the mess out.

Mob. The word stung her. Even muttered in her mind, it felt like a brick hurled at her. Yes, whether she wanted to admit it or not, her father was mob. So was Jake. In complete honesty, so was she. Being born into a mob family wasn't something a person could walk out on. No matter where she went, what she tried to forget, or what she wanted to become, her roots would still be mob, Mafia, Mafioso, whatever. She wondered if Phil was the same.

She tapped her fingers on her arm. Did it matter? Not really. Everything was illegal, and her life was riddled with crime.

The elevator coasted to a stop, a sharp ting announcing her floor. Rene stepped off and headed for the waiting area. Doctors and nurses in white and green uniforms weaved in the hallway gaps around her as the rubber soles of her tennis shoes squeaked against the tile. A cart skidded to a stop in front of her, and an aide fell forward, sprawling across the metal top.

Rene stopped. Her body lunged forward, her arms flapping for balance. The young aide pulled herself upright, her eyes widened with apology.

Rene shook her head, made an arch around the cart, and kept moving. It was bad enough she left herself open at the cemetery. Things turned out okay. She didn't wind up dead. But she needed to remember not to go places alone any more.

If the thugs were right, and Rancey was on the take, she might not be safe until she got things under control. How she was going to get them under control she didn't know. Rancey wanted her to dig up something on Jake. The thugs wanted her to get information on Rancey. She had no idea why the thugs wanted her to do something like that, or how the Matero family was involved, but her gut told her they weren't just doing her a favor.

Perhaps they wanted to discredit Rancey. Getting an agent on tape threatening someone might take the pressure off whatever case the agent was working on. No, that didn't make sense. If Rancey was extorting someone in the Matero family, they could record whatever conversations they had with him and accomplish the same thing.

Jake stood against the wall, his eyes fixed down the hallway on her father's room. He looked concerned, his forehead wrinkled, crow's feet at the corner of his eyes, his hair tousled.

She reached inside her purse, grabbed the tape, and threw it at him as hard as she could. It bounced off his forehead. Too bad it didn't take an eye out. Too bad he was such an asshole. Too bad she thought she could trust him.

"What the . . .?" His fingers reached for the spot where the cassette hit him.

She shouted, "Screw you, Batella!" while she kept walking down the hallway toward her father's room. "I don't ever want to talk to you again!" she yelled with her back to him. A nurse and an orderly looked up, their mouths open, as her hand hit the door and the hinges groaned against the weight of her shove.

Semi-darkness cloaked the room. No lights were visible until she reached the center and saw one small pinprick of light focused on the top of her father's head, setting his face off in a death glow. Not angelic, but a gray pallor.

Her mother glanced toward the door, surprise flitting across her face until Rene stepped forward. "He's doing okay now. Jake called me when his heart stopped, and they had to bring in a crash cart to resuscitate him. But no worry. He has a strong heart, even if it's having a tough time of it." Her mother's words stopped as she took a breath and let her hand wander down to her husband's. Nothing. No response, but her father was still breathing. The respirator pumped, and the air wheezed in and out with a solid rhythm.

They both stood there. Neither of them talked while her mother held her father's hand, and Rene stared at her shoes. Dry mud covered the rubber tips of the toes. She could still feel the wet cemetery inside.

She opened the blinds, letting gray daylight flood the room. She folded her arms across her stomach and stared out the window, her eyes on the street and overpass above it, watching the cars pass. At times, she wondered how her father and Jake came to be, what made them so close. She hadn't even known they were connected until Rancey told her that day in her shop a year ago. A year. Crap. She couldn't believe she let a year of her life get swallowed up trying to avoid the inevitable, thinking about how her father might be manipulating Jake. He picked the right person. Jake wanted a father. Her father needed a son to take over the business. But why her former lover?

A gurgling sound came from behind her. She turned to hear her father say, "Leave us, Irene."

Her mother's head jerked up. Her eyes moved from Rene to her husband. "Are you sure?"

Her father's hand lifted in a weak dismissive wave, and after a quick hug, her mother's heels clattered on the tile. She said she'd be back later, and the door closed with a light whoosh. The staccato of her footsteps disappeared.

Rene walked to her father's bedside. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jeans, not saying anything. The rhythmic blip of his heart monitor beat in her ears. The tracheal tube now leading from the machine to his throat ended in a great pucker, pulling the anger out of him, rather than pushing the life into him, or what was left of his life. She wanted to feel sad, sorry for him, but she couldn't.

"So you came back." Her father's voice air-tunneled from his mouth.

"I've been here for a while."

"Yes." His eyes were still closed, the corner of his mouth twisted downward in a weak frown.

"You were sleeping."

"No, I just didn't feel like talking to you."

What he said didn't surprise her. She knew he chose silence with her. He talked to her mother. He talked to Jake. But he hadn't spoken a single word to her.

"I hear you've been talking with the Bureau."

She didn't answer.

"Well, no matter." Her father pushed the button on the bed. His body bent upward, his head moving to an upright position, as though he wanted to take a good look at her, even though his eyes were still closed.

"You shouldn't—"

He said, soft, almost inaudible, "I killed that son-of-a-bitch."

"What?"

Her father opened his eyes and stared at her, hard, deliberate, open, choosing to let her dip into his soul. Flashes pelted her. Visions of his fat lips pursed to different ears and in different telephone receivers raged through her head. Unknown hands pulling triggers, handling knives, and swinging tire irons, baseball bats, anything they could grab. Orders ending dozens of lives fell back through the years marked by landscapes, clothing, calendars,

and her father's face until they landed at the base, and one set of pictures snapped through her mind.

Snap. Her father standing on a street, wiping his hands on his pants leg. Snap. Her father staring at a house, looking from a piece of paper up to the metal numbers beside the door. Snap. Her father squatting down, his neck craned against the darkness. Snap. Her father positioned on his back, scooting across the concrete to the underbelly of a car. Snap. His hands stretched above him, prying, pulling. Snap. A pair of tin snips appeared, a metal line, tires, rims, and chrome.

Her breath stopped. Her mouth opened. He laughed. A short gasp, followed by a cough. Horror bulged against her skin, forcing her body rigid. The breathing machine pumped up and down in the background while her thoughts raced across the years of pain she and J.S. held together. The blame they accepted for their inability to prevent one suicide, or so they thought. None of it was true, no despondent suicide, nothing within the reach of their emotional caring. Only the murderous act of the man who created her, so obsessed with control he was willing to kill anyone who threatened his territory, including Buddy, including her, even including her mother, if need be.

Her eyes moved from the heart monitor to the bags of fluid, then to the metal switch holding her father's life. One downward click and it would be over. Her father would be gone, and she could forget he ever existed.

His voice rasped, "You don't have the balls, girl, never did."

Rene reached out. Her fingers touched the cold metal, her emotions taunting her to take the next step.

"Do it!" her father hissed. "Get even. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Her hand stopped. Her eyes fell on the pathetic frame of the man she hated, the man who made her life miserable for so many years. Small. Fragile. He was a man wanting to die, begging for death at her hands.

Rene pulled her fingers away. She laughed. A short burst forced from her body. "What? And help you? Not a chance. You deserve every bit of suffering you get."

His lips parted as she turned to leave. Her steps felt heavy walking across the slick hospital tiles and out the door. They felt heavier moving past her mother and Jake. She could hear her mother's voice calling after her, "Rene, where are you going?"

She kept walking. The elevator was only a few steps away. The parking lot was only a few steps after that.

Chapter 33

J.S.

J.S. stepped out of the Porsche and thrust his hands into the pockets of his black cotton pants. The red carpet leading from the nightclub to the blacktop pickup area lapped at him like a tongue, a razz letting him know he couldn't walk across it and through the brass-trimmed glass doors. Keith called him two hours ago, yet hadn't made an appearance. The doorman with his white gloves and his squared hat stood at the front entrance, refusing to let anyone in.

A group of people straggled out, swaying in drunken laughter. J.S. darted his head back and forth, and then up and down, looking them over. He rolled his eyes when a redhead in high green pumps tripped over the post holding the dark green awning up. She fell against a woman with a poodle hairdo. A man grabbed her around the waist and swung her up into his arms, shouting, "Come home with me, baby!" She slurred out an answer as J.S. kicked at the pavement.

L.A. was nothing but trouble. Not his job. That part was easy. Keith had him running errands and scheduling appointments for the most part. Other times, he waited for Keith outside some restaurant or bar, talking with uptight chauffeurs, who kept telling him he shouldn't be driving and doing the appointment thing, like it was some type of union regulation, and he'd wind up getting his legs busted. He didn't care. He loved doing every bit of it.

About the only thing he missed was cooking. Roast chicken, stir-fry, stuffed cabbage, ribs, potato skins, steamed vegetables, or anything else he could think of, depending on the time available for the fixing. But he had to admit he liked Mrs. Bumbe, even if she did have a mole on her cheek that made him itch. She was more like a concierge than a housekeeper since she ran things so tight, like a high-dollar hotel with stiff sheets and towels folded into flowers. Everything polished, dusted, and scrubbed. Not one single speck of dust made it past her.

J.S. could see why Keith hired her. He needed a short, black woman with a prim attitude to keep him in line. She was sassy. Not the same type of sassy J.S. liked in the women he dated, like he ever had any time to find a woman to date, but in a different sort of way. She let

people know she was smart enough to understand there was a line she couldn't cross, yet strong enough not to put up with much. It was an attitude he could appreciate.

Plus, she didn't want to admit it, but he knew she liked him. He could tell by the way she was always saying, "No, no, no. If you're going to be a black man, then act like one. Take pride in it. Be a black man people look up to." She got on his case about the way he talked, the way he walked, even the way he sat when he ate with her. "You need to say grace. Aren't you grateful for the life you have, and the food you're eating?"

Here he was, less than a year out of prison, living in a mansion with a housekeeper who thought she was his mother. She put him in black pants and white shirts. Not that he looked bad in them. In fact, he liked looking professional, shaped up as though he rolled out of college rather than off the GED cart. But she also tried to teach him about stupid stuff, like how to use silverware, no, make that flatware, or was it dinnerware? Shit. He needed to remember the difference if he was ever going to get the forks straight.

He could swim in the pool if he wanted. He could play cue or watch movies, tons of movies. Keith had a whole wall full of them and a big screen television the size of twenty televisions like his mother had, whenever hers wasn't in the pawn shop.

Driving the Porsche was something, too. Wind, shift, glide. He never had to slam the gears. Who would've thought such a small car could go so fast? Keith said he was thinking about trading it in for a Jag. J.S. wasn't sure what driving a Jag might feel like, but he knew he wanted to try it if Keith thought the car was worth having.

The one thing he couldn't get used to was the women. He never thought so many different types existed, different sizes, different colors, different hairdos, different everything anyone could imagine. They dripped from Keith like diamonds. Beautiful, smiling diamonds that coated Keith like sugar wherever he went.

Not that Keith brought any of them home. Andrea Kandet was the only one who had house privileges. She slept over, ordered Mrs. Bumbe around like her personal servant, left her clothing in Keith's closet, decorated the den in three stupid shades of pink, and acted like she and Keith were hooked at the elbows.

What a snotty bitch. She needed to quit calling him "boy." Your "boy" this and your "boy" that. One more time and he thought he was going to punch her. No, he couldn't do that.

He'd never hit a woman, even if she was the biggest bitch he'd ever met, and he'd met plenty of them during his thirty-six years.

J.S. couldn't understand why Keith got engaged to her. Or at least he thought they were engaged. She wore an engagement ring. Yet, Keith never mentioned anything about marrying her, which was funny considering how Keith used to talk to him about everything. Not since they hit L.A., though.

He didn't know what was eating at Keith. Something sure was. Keith was sucking down enough alcohol for twenty people, more than he ever drank in Montana, getting so drunk that half the time someone had to haul his ass home and carry him in. Well, not at first, not until the last couple months. Before that, he got drunk. He just did it at home.

J.S. shook his head. He couldn't even figure out why Keith wanted to go to so many nightclubs. It just left his ass hanging out, ready for some sleaze with a camera to shoot him up. It sure wasn't for the women. Keith could find them anywhere and bring a dozen of them home with nothing to worry about, no press, no industry types, no one to squeal on him.

The nightclub thing was something else. Maybe more to do with spilling out his depression. Not that J.S. could figure out why, or what could be pushing Keith over the edge like a shark gnawing at its own guts.

The door to the nightclub opened, and the backside of a bouncer poked through. Keith's armpits hung from the bouncer's hands. Another bouncer appeared, his hands holding Keith by the knees. Keith still had a glass half-full of scotch in his hand.

J.S. yanked open the passenger door as the bouncers headed his way. With an odd-angled heave, they managed to wedge Keith in the passenger seat, and J.S. pulled out two of the fifties Keith gave him. Each bouncer took a bill and tucked them into their pockets.

"How bad was it?" J.S. asked.

The bouncer with a chiseled chin said, "About the usual."

J.S. wondered which usual. Keith had so many levels of drunkenness, depending on what bar or nightclub he was in and his mood for the night.

The big-shouldered bouncer thumbed his nose. "He showed his dick to a brunette at the bar. She didn't seem to mind none, though. Kinda looked like she liked it even. I doubt it'll be a problem."

The first bouncer said, "The one waiting in the bathroom line might cause trouble."

J.S. rubbed his forehead. "Bathroom line?" He wondered how much of this Keith's publicist should know. "Spin control" was the phrase she used whenever Keith got himself involved in stupid stuff. "Blow it off, or build it up."

"Yeah," the nose-thumbing bouncer said. "A blonde dragged him into the women's bathroom and backed the line up. Doubt they did anything, though. They were only in there ten minutes or so, and he looked kind of glassy eyed when she pulled him back out, planted him on a barstool, and left. She didn't look none to happy, either, like she didn't get nothing, or at least not enough to take the edge off her scrawny ass." The bouncer laughed for a second before he looked down and kicked at the pavement, like he realized it wasn't funny. "I don't think the old broad waiting in line to take a piss liked it very much, though. I saw her complaining to Tom."

Tom was the manager and wouldn't cause any trouble, but hard to say about the woman. "Anything else?" J.S. asked while he bent over to situate Keith's feet and make sure his head was against the headrest. Keith was out of it, unconscious.

Both bouncers stared at one another a moment, as though they were considering everything that happened and which incident might be worth reporting, or rate another fifty. J.S. reached in his pocket.

"Well," the sharp-chinned bouncer stretched out. "Andrea Kandet's physical trainer was in for a couple gin and tonics. Not sure how far that'll go."

Plenty. It would mean another bitch-fest at the house tomorrow. "Was he there during the . . ."

"No, he left before the dick came out or the bathroom thing happened. Probably all he saw was a little flirting. You know. Broads hanging all over him, trying to get him to sign an autograph, or give them a little kiss on the cheek. No big deal, really. Just thought you'd want to know in case Ms. Kandet hears something."

Her trainer would tell her. That much was as sure as a thunderstorm in April. "Okay," J.S. said, doling out another pair of fifties. "I'd appreciate if you could keep this between us."

One bouncer shrugged, and the other nodded. “No problem. Mr. North is always welcome here. Plus, you already know we keep the cameras out. Tom don’t like no cameras. Drives people off.”

J.S. pulled the shoulder harness over Keith’s head and strapped it down. He took the drink out of Keith’s hand and handed it to one of the bouncers. No open containers in the car, not while he was driving, no matter how much Keith protested. Parole officers didn’t put up with much shit, and he still had a little over two years to go, even if he was free to go back to Ohio in less than a month.

Darby made the point clear before J.S. even left Montana. “No trouble or you’ll wind up in the Orange County lockdown until I come after you, got that?”

It didn’t seem to matter that he did a favor for the guy in the back seat of Darby’s car. Nothing seemed to matter. Well, not exactly. The guy said he’d look out for Rene and make sure she didn’t wind up in trouble. That counted for something.

J.S. got in the car and headed off for I-5. Twenty minutes and they should be home with 3:00 a.m. traffic. In the daytime, the trip would take an hour or more.

“So whadaya think?” Keith slurred out, his finger pointing at the windshield, like he was asking the wiper blades.

“I dunno. I suppose I think a lot of stuff.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. But don ya think we both jus woun up gettin diss’d?”

J.S. puzzled over the question for a minute. “I dunno.” That should cover whatever Keith was trying to ask him.

“Well, ya fuckin oughta know!”

“Oughta know what?” J.S. asked, but he never got an answer. He looked over at Keith, whose head was back with his mouth gaping wide. Flies, J.S. thought. All he was ever going to catch was flies, if Keith didn’t open up and let more than a few drunken thoughts cross between them.

Chapter 34

Jake

Jake sat in Gar's office, facing the door, his hands clasped in his lap. Rene stood behind her father's desk, shuffling papers, her hair twisted up in a loose bun, her eyes down. It was July 7th, less than a week after Gar's funeral. Other than ordering him to the meeting, Rene hadn't spoken to him since she whacked him upside the head with the cassette tape. She quit coming to the hospital, and at the funeral, she avoided him.

The fumbled hit irritated Gar, but Jake was smart enough to realize if Rene had the recording, Rancey also had it, and if the hit had gone off, that slime-ball could've used the recording to send him away for life. He didn't like the idea of killing Rene to begin with, but after the tape showed up, he knew killing her was out of the question, no matter what Gar wanted.

Eliminating the idea from Gar's head was easy once Rene quit coming around. All he had to do was a little talking and a little convincing, plus a few dollars tossed out. It didn't take long to get everyone, including Irene, who cost him nothing, to push Gar into thinking Rene was gone, dead, finished.

Sure, it was manipulative, but also very productive. Gar took his last breath a happy man, and he, Jake Batella, was about to get his reward.

He assumed the meeting was to announce his new position, and he felt confident about handling the responsibility. Asshole that Gar was, the man taught him well, where the money was and how to get at it. Of course, he had a few ideas of his own. Some of them might mean taking a few more risks than in the past, but the men wouldn't object once the money started pouring in and their bank accounts grew fatter.

Rene sat down and started thrumming her fingers on the smooth cherry surface. All but one of the players, at least those with any major interest in the business, were already seated. The room felt hot, filled with tension and nervous sweat mixed with smoke and the smell of something baking in the kitchen.

Irene's voice drifted down the hallway. "Can you take this tray with you?"

Soon, Wade Fielding made an appearance with a silver platter full of fresh sliced bread. Wade sat the tray on a table at the back of the room, and for a moment, Jake's thoughts flashed back to the pool game in Phil's basement so many years ago, and how Wade helped Rene make a fool out of him. He wondered if Wade remembered and regretted that incident now.

A smile broke across Rene's face. "Hi, Wade. Glad to see you made it."

"Hey, Rene." The folding chair groaned against the weight of Wade's body. Feathery silver hair stuck up from his balding head. "Sorry, I'm late."

Clyde Andrews stood to retrieve a piece of bread. He knifed a glob of butter across the white slice crusted in brown and brought it to his mouth. His cigarette stained teeth ripped off a hunk and his pulpy lips and double chin moved as he chewed.

"Take a seat," Jake mouthed, his voice barely audible.

Andrews grabbed a napkin and sat down. Rene came around the desk to sit on the top. She stuck her hands beneath her thighs and let her feet swing. Her legs looked shapely in the knee-length black skirt she wore. Her breasts seemed smaller, de-emphasized, by the black jacket and sharp collar points of her white cotton shirt. With the outfit and her hair pulled back in a tight professional bun, she resembled a lawyer.

The younger men sitting around the room had skeptical, who-the-fuck-are-you expressions on their faces. The old farts looked as though nothing mattered, like they'd seen it all before.

Rene cleared her throat. "I assume you're all wondering what's going on, and with the estate still in progress, me being an only child, and my mother asking me to take care of this, I suppose I'm the one to tell you." She hesitated a moment and placed the palms of her hands flat on the desk. "The business will no longer run any illegal operations."

"But—" It was Donnie, one of the recruits Jake personally picked and brought through the ranks.

Rene held her hand up. "The business will continue. It has a lot of legitimate interests and any of you who want involved will be shifted to those locations, but I want to make this extremely clear." Rene looked at each of them, one at a time. "There will be no more illegal activities of any kind."

The men mumbled among themselves, all but Wade, who seemed preoccupied with something outside the window. Jake followed Wade's line of vision to a woodpecker with its redhead working hard against a pine tree, its efforts matching the faint nailing sound in the background.

Rene said. "If you're caught in any type of illegal activity, you're gone."

"Gone?" Ralph laughed. He was another one from the younger crowd. "What's that supposed to mean? You gonna have us bumped off?"

"What that means is you'll receive your last check, and you'll no longer be working for me."

Jake tightened his fists. Working for her? Like hell. Gar wouldn't leave her in charge for a second. Not even during the estate process.

Rene's eyes flitted across him a moment. Her mouth tightened. "I'm sure some of you are wondering how I can make a call like this, so let me tell you. My father left the business to me lock, stock and barrel. I didn't expect it. I didn't even want it, but. . ." She stopped and took a deep breath, more like a sigh. "If I'm going to own it, and I'm going to run it, the darned thing had better, and will be, legal. I want the stolen items turned into the police. Take them to the closest precinct, drop them off, and give them my phone number. I'll take it from there. But in the meantime, there will be no more B&Es, no more drug running, and no more illegal prostitution." She stopped again and looked at a picture of her father and Phil hanging above the mantel. "Like I said, there will be no illegal operations of any kind, and we'll be focusing our interests on the casinos, the legitimate antique trade, the other small businesses we own, the legal prostitution houses, and the movie industry, since we have a good grounding in these areas."

The men mumbled, but Jake overrode them. "And what about Agent Rancey? Are you going to use your connections with the Bureau to put us in prison while you strip us clean?"

Rene's expression remained calm, but her eyes squinted and hardened to cold gray flint. "If you go to jail, you'll go by your own means, not because of anything I have to say."

One of the men, Tommie, another man Jake recruited, stood—maybe to leave, maybe to beat the shit out of Rene. Jake wasn't sure.

"Sit down," Rene said.

Tommie took a step forward.

Rene stood. "I said sit down!"

Wade and two of the old crewmembers jumped up. Tommie glanced from side-to-side, shook his head, and sat back down, muttering beneath his breath.

"Thank you." Rene nodded to Wade and the others as they returned to their seats. "I won't hide the fact I've been talking with Agent Rancey, and he's with the Bureau. I have. Jake already knows it. My father knew it before he put me in charge."

Jake looked at the floor. She was right. Gar knew about her involvement with Rancey. It didn't make any sense. Gar had to know she'd dismantle the business. "What's that supposed to mean? Nothing you've said guarantees we won't be sitting in jail tomorrow. You could easily roll over on us."

"It means I cut a deal with the Bureau to get J.S. out of prison." Rene turned and nodded to a few men who came from Phil's camp. "Some of you remember J.S. Some of you don't. But it doesn't matter. I cut the deal to eliminate my father, close out the business, and. . ."

Jake listened as the men grumbled over the implications, but Rene ignored them.

"Make sure Jake doesn't gain control," she finished.

The room went silent. Jake could feel their eyes, all thirty-two pair of them, on him. Embarrassment flooded him, but he didn't want to show it, and he didn't want to walk from the room like a whipped puppy.

Rene tapped her fingers on the edge of her father's desk. The office was large, but felt tight, like an elevator jammed with people, spiraling downward. The sun blared through the window. Rene walked over and closed the thick brocade curtains. She adjusted her shirt before she walked back to the desk and took a short breath. "As long as all of you do exactly—" She stopped. "And I mean exactly what I'm saying, you won't have anything to worry about. You all have talents. You've been running various components of the business for years. You may not know me, and I'll tell you, I don't know much about running a corporation, but those of you who do know me, know I don't bullshit."

"That's true," Wade agreed. "You were a brat, but never a bullshitter."

Rene laughed. Some of the men chuckled. Others smiled. The rest had hard angry eyes. Jake remained expressionless. No point in losing his cool and letting Rene think she had the

upper hand, because she didn't. The majority of the men wouldn't follow her. Losing the assets, which meant the distribution points and money laundering components, would be difficult, but manageable. He could set up another operation.

"I'm glad at least some of you recognize I'm not out to screw you," Rene said. "But as many of you can imagine, this transition is going to be difficult. Jake and I have some business we need to attend to. Afterwards, I'll be getting in touch with each of you to find out if you're staying or leaving." She moved behind the desk and sat down. "We're now at the end of our meeting."

The men stayed in their seats a moment, some with their mouths frozen tight, others running their hands threw their hair. Rene fussed with her shirt collar. Jake stood at the back of the room with his hands clasped below his belt and his eyes on her, not acknowledging a single comment from the men as they left.

Business to attend to, his ass! If she thought she was going to get rid of him that easy, she was screwed in the head.

As soon as the last man left, Jake closed the door. "Bitch! Who the hell do you think you are telling everyone you plan to make sure I don't get control of the business?"

Rene picked up a stack of papers and tapped them on the desk, straightening them, before placing them back in front of her. "Maybe you should sit down and listen before you move on to calling me a slut or something equally repulsive."

Jake moved forward, but he stayed standing. The veins in his head pounded. He wanted to hit her, beat the shit out of her.

"I'm sorry I had to say that in front of everyone," she said. "But you pushed it."

"You're damned right I pushed it. I spent six years sucking up to your father and learning how to run this business while you were in Montana. Hell, you haven't even been involved for nearly eleven years now, and you get everything? That's bullshit. Pure, unadulterated bullshit."

Rene leaned back in the chair and folded her hands in her lap. "Well, you did try to kill me. What did you expect? I would just hand the business over to you after I inherited it?"

"Screw you. If I wanted you dead, you wouldn't be sitting here right now dishing out this shit. You think I couldn't have killed you in Montana? You think I couldn't have picked up a phone and hired somebody to do it? Trust me. I could've. In a heartbeat."

Rene leaned forward, put her elbows on the desk, and propped her chin on her hands. “Why didn’t you then?”

Jake stopped, his mouth frozen. He wanted to spit more insults, shout, throw something he was so damned mad, but her question hit him square in the chest. Why didn’t he? Killing her would’ve been the easiest solution. She knew it. He knew it. So, why didn’t he just go ahead and do it when he had the chance?

Rene picked up a packet of papers from the top of the stack sitting before her. “My mother told me what you did, that you got everyone to convince my father you’d already handled it, killed me off. But even though I’m sure you didn’t count on things turning out the way they did, not killing me was probably the best thing you could’ve done.”

“How do you figure that? It seems to me that I’d be a whole lot richer at the moment if I’d just gone ahead and done it.”

“You’re right. You’re absolutely right.” Rene tossed the packet of papers to the edge of the desk. “There’s my father’s will. Read it, if you want.”

Jake sat down, picked up the stack of legal pages, and started flipping through them. Gar set things up so the business passed to Rene first and him second. He couldn’t believe it. He screwed himself. Gar thought Rene was dead and the will was sufficient.

“The funny thing is if you’d inherited the business, you’d have gone to prison.” Rene shrugged. “Either for murder or racketeering. Take your pick.”

Jake tossed the will back onto the desk. “I might’ve beaten the murder rap, and you know it. That tape didn’t say anything that amounted to shit. And, besides, I wouldn’t have been the one handling the situation.”

“That’s true,” Rene said. “But then there’s the matter of this little ditty.” She leaned forward and placed a thick envelope in front of him.

Jake picked it up. The package was address to Agent Rancey. He pulled out the thick wad of papers inside and started thumbing through them, stopping to read a couple in more detail. “And this is information you collected?”

“No, it’s what my father ordered his attorney to mail the minute the business went into your hands.”

The blood vessels in Jake's forehead beat hard, matching his heart, ready to explode. That bastard. Gar's little package would've put him in prison. Or he would've wound up paying half of the profits out to Rancey just to prevent it. Why would Gar pass the business off to him only to throw Mount Everest in his path?

"I don't believe it," he said, and he didn't. Gar wouldn't do something like that.

Rene shrugged. "Feel free to call the attorney. I'll give him permission to talk with you, if you like, but if you look, you'll see the envelope was addressed in my father's handwriting."

Jake stared at the lettering. "I don't understand why he'd want to do something like that."

"Probably because you disobeyed his orders."

Yes, probably, Jake thought. Knowing what a shit Gar was, it sounded right.

"My father manipulated you, and he made me the prize. Knowing him, I'd say he most likely had it in mind from the minute he bought you so high up. I'm not sure why he hated me so much. Other than. . ." She tapped her fingers on the table before she let out a small laugh. "Well, I disobeyed him." Her soft brown eyes met his, and she ran her fingers across her lips in a thoughtful manner. "My guess is he found out you didn't kill me, so he gave the business to me to punish you. I know he didn't give his attorney the package until shortly before he died." With a shrug, she added, "I suppose he figured if someone else killed me before the will took effect—maybe someone who wanted to make sure I didn't come into power and dismantle the business—or maybe even you, just too late for his taste—he wanted to make sure you had a mess on your hands."

Jake looked up. She was right. It clicked. Gar moving him up so fast. Gar encouraging him to have sex with women who looked like Rene, even participating, doing it himself. Gar goading him to suck up the power, think he had a shot at the gold. Gar pulling the dollars out from underneath Rancey, knowing what might happen, maybe even forcing it to happen. All of it was a test, or maybe a setup. And all of it started nearly from day one.

Gar hated Rene, and Gar also wanted to see if he—Jake Batella—had the balls to do whatever it took to keep the business running, even if it meant killing Rene, especially if it meant killing Rene, the one thing Gar knew he wouldn't want to do. And the price for failing? Give the business to the person he should've killed and didn't. Or set him up for a prison sentence if someone else took care of it.

“Why tell me all of this?” Jake asked. “You have the business. Run it.”

“Because I want you to know that even though you may think you made a mistake by not killing me, you didn’t. Your instinct was right. I could’ve given Rancey the information he wanted. I’ve had access to it since shortly after I arrived and started sifting through my father’s files. But I didn’t.”

Jake shrugged. “Why? I never asked you to do me a favor.”

“I didn’t give Rancey the information for the same reason you didn’t kill me.”

Jake snorted. He felt like standing up, walking out, forgetting about all of it, and moving on with his life, whatever that life might amount to now.

“Look, Jake, we lived together, we loved each other, and—”

“You didn’t love me. If you loved me, you wouldn’t have walked out eleven years ago. We both know that.”

“Do we?” Her gray eyes watched him with a hint of sadness. “Did you ever bother to follow me and find out? Did you ever think I might’ve just thought you didn’t love me enough to give up crime?”

“Did you ask?”

“No,” she said, her eyes darted away for a second. “I suppose you’re right. Maybe I should’ve asked, but. . .”

“But what?”

“I didn’t, and maybe you’re right, maybe I didn’t love you enough, maybe I’m not capable of loving anyone, maybe I don’t even know what love is any more.” She hesitated, her eyes glistening with moisture. “I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but somehow, I think I’m stuck, like things in my past grabbed me, and they’re never going to let go.”

Jake sat still for a minute. The grandfather clock ticked in the background. The woodpecker was still pounding away at the soft pine in the distance. He thought about Virginia for a moment before he said, “I understand.”

Chapter 35

Rene

The red neon sign declaring Frank's Diner threw a pink cast across the white Formica tabletop. Rene could hear the metal scrape of a spatula. The smell of sizzling grilled meat and french-fries made her feel greasy, and the adhesive tape holding the small cassette recorder in place made her skin itch.

Rene stirred the straw in her soda, swirling the ice into a small hurricane, before she picked up her fork and moved a few shreds of coleslaw around in the bowl in front of her. She didn't know the best way to bug herself. Heck, she didn't know the best method for bugging period. But the thugs who chased her down at the cemetery and shoved the tape recorder in her face were right. She needed to wear it. Not just now, but everywhere. Rancey had a habit of popping up when she least expected.

Today, though, she knew Rancey was coming. He called and set up the meeting, something he hadn't done since they were in Montana. She wondered why, what was so important about the meeting that it required prearrangement.

Oh well, at least his approach gave her time to prepare. She opted to place the cassette player inside the front pocket of her jeans with the record button sticking up. Then, she taped the wires to her stomach and wrapped the microphone around her bra strap. She figured the setup would provide clear reception and give her easy access to the record button. Plus, she could excuse herself to the restroom and change tapes, if need be, in less time than it took to wash her hands.

Now, she sat ready, bored. Rancey was late, another oddity. Punctuality was his forte. He always arrived early for meetings.

The diner wasn't packed, but for a grease dive, it was busy. Most of the patrons, all men, were older, probably in their fifties or sixties. A couple even looked like they might be pushing eighty. The waitress wore a white food service uniform, thin from too many washings. Her graying hair formed a knot at the base of her head, and a pencil poked through the side, above her ear. Her white shoes squeaked as she approached the table and asked, "Care for anything else, sugar?"

“Maybe a refill on the Diet Coke, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure, no problem. Looks like your fellow stood you up.”

Rene opened her mouth to tell the waitress Rancey wasn’t her “fellow,” but the fat bell attached to the door jingled, and Rancey rushed through the door, his dark hair mussed—another first. She quickly reached inside her jeans pocket and pressed the record button. She hoped Rancey didn’t notice.

He slid into the booth, looked at the waitress, and said, “Coffee. Black,” before turning to Rene and saying, “I’m late.”

“I noticed.” The waitress moved off, and Rene slid forward in the booth, resting her arms on the Formica tabletop. “Trouble in FBI paradise?”

Rancey wiped the sweat from his forehead. “No, I just hate Cleveland.”

“You could always leave.” Rene smiled sarcastically, but she doubted Rancey would get it.

“One city’s just as bad as the next.”

The waitress returned with her soda and Rancey’s coffee. “Anything else?” she asked.

“Yeah, privacy,” Rancey said.

The waitress gave a slight huff before she walked off and stood at the counter scowling at him. Rene didn’t blame her. Rancey seemed oblivious to the effect he had on people. Ordinary, law-abiding citizens didn’t even like his abrupt just-the-facts approach.

Rancey blew across the top of his coffee. “That shit you gave me on Batella didn’t amount to anything.”

“Really? I thought it might help.”

Their eyes met. His crystal blue—what ordinarily would make an attractive color for a man—jabbed at her like ice spears. “Don’t play dumb with me, Matio. We both know you deliberately handed me a packet of shit. Plus, don’t think I’m so stupid I didn’t notice you failed to mention you took control of your father’s business. Care to tell me what you’re up to? Or should I scrounge around and find out for myself? “

“You didn’t ask me, so I figured you knew. It’s not like the information’s a secret. My father’s attorney filed probate papers. Anyone can go down to the courthouse and have a look.”

“You know I could have you arrested for racketeering or obstruction, maybe both. I got your pal out of prison. You agreed to help me collect information, and you haven’t.”

“That’s not the way I remember things. You told me to go back into the business, and I did. You can’t put me in jail for doing what you asked me to do.”

“I don’t give a shit how you remember things. What I did or didn’t ask you isn’t important.”

“Well, it is to me. I told you I’d help you take my father out-of-business. He’s dead, so he’s out. I told you I’d help you make sure Jake didn’t gain control, and he didn’t. So, as far as I’m concerned, I’ve fulfilled my end of the—”

“You didn’t fulfill shit. The FBI doesn’t give a damn about whether you think you resolved the problem or not. We’re the ones who decide when things are wrapped up. Besides, you didn’t do anything. It just happened. Your father dying didn’t have a damned thing to do with you. Batella not gaining control wasn’t something you set up, either.”

“It still happened, and I’d think the Bureau would be darned happy about it.”

“And what about the business?”

Rene smiled. It was obvious Rancey was after something else. She thought it since the start, but she needed to toss a hook in the water to prove it. “What about the business? Do you want me to shut it down? Would that satisfy you? I can do it, you know.”

Rancey’s jaw clenched. “No, that won’t satisfy me, and you know it. I’m sure Batella told you.”

Okay, now for a little line. Let him feel nice and comfortable about the hook floating around out there. “I’m sorry, but Jake didn’t tell me much of anything. Well, nothing worth repeating. He wasn’t exactly happy when he heard the terms of my father’s will.” Rene watched Rancey’s face redden. “In fact, he called me names I didn’t even know existed. It was pretty ugly. I wish you could’ve—”

“I don’t give a fuck!” Rancey waved his hand in the air. People turned to stare.

Rene blinked. She could see his demeanor unraveling with each word she uttered. Okay, time for a little more bait. “Then what? If you don’t want me to shut down the business, what do you want?”

Rancey glanced around the diner, adjusted his collar, and settled back into his seat. His voice lowered. "My cut. Twenty-five percent off the top is what your father agreed to."

Snag! "I see," Rene said. Things could turn out better than she expected. "So if my father agreed to this figure, and this is what you want, why'd you ask me to help you put him in jail? I'm a little puzzled about—"

"It doesn't matter." Rancey leaned back in the seat. "The offer's fair, and that's what it's going to take to keep the business rolling and both you and your pal out of jail. Plus, I've decided I might even work on coming up with something on your mother and that actor you were dating. Keith North, isn't that his name? I figure even if he dumped you, he still ought to pay for his association with you. Maybe everyone you come in contact with should pay. What do you think?"

Screw you. Kiss my brown ass. Both came to her mind, but she decided to toss out another hook instead. "I dunno. It seems like paying you would just get me in deeper. You know, bribing an agent? Maybe I should just take my chances with the racketeering and obstruction thing."

Rancey leaned forward, his body bent halfway across the table. "You need to get something straight. If you do that, I'll make absolutely certain you go to prison. Not some cushy country club, either. I'll make sure you wind up in maximum security where serial killers will eye you up, not just pickpockets. You'll be sweating it out with the crazies for twenty years or more. By the time you get out, that's saying you get out alive, you'll be ready for Social Security. Get the picture?"

Stay calm. Feed him the line. "Yes, I think I understand, but these guys from the Matero family told me that you're into them two million dollars on top of the money they're paying you, and I just can't afford to—"

Rancey's shoved his finger in her face. "The Matero family doesn't mean shit to me. I don't care what some guys told you. They don't have anything to do with this."

"Okay," Rene said, wrinkling her nose, deciding it was best to feed him the whole line, everything she had. "They seemed like a couple of shady fellows anyway. But I'm trying to figure out why I need to pay you. I shut down the illegal portion of the business right after I inherited it. I told the men to turn everything over to the police, and—"

“You what?” Rancey shouted.

More people turned to stare. One man stood up from the counter and pulled his coat on. The cook turned around, waved a spatula dripping with hamburger grease at them, and said, “Keep it down over there! I got other customers in here, you know?”

Rancey bent across the table, moving even closer, his body off the seat of the booth. “You made a mistake. A very big mistake.” He sat back down, smiled, and said, “It’s time.”

“Time for what?” Rene asked.

The door slapped open. Two men wearing full SWAT outfits with the words FBI plastered in gold across the chest of their bullet proof vests burst through the door. One man grabbed her arm, yanked her out of the booth, and slammed her face on the table. The other held an assault rifle to her head.

Rene couldn’t see their faces, but she could hear the click of handcuffs snapping around her wrists and feel the rough movement of hands between her legs, moving upward across her body. The hands reached her stomach. The man behind her laughed a cold, malicious laugh. His hands plunged beneath her shirt and ripped the recorder from her, the tape tearing at her skin and the microphone snapping her bra strap.

“Well, well, well,” Rancey said as the man jerked her to her feet and tossed the bugging device on the table. “What do we have here?”

The man with the rifle still held to her head said, in a low gruff voice, “Nothing. That’s what she has. Nothing.”

People in the restaurant sat silent, their eyes wide and mouth gaping, while the man holding her by the handcuffs and shoulder swung her around. Rene heard the waitress shout, “Hey, who’s paying the bill?”

The man steering her toward the door started rambling, “You have the right to remain silent. . .” The first part was enough. Rene figured she didn’t need to pay attention to the rest.

Chapter 36

Jake

Jake leaned back against the cool leather of the office chair and propped his feet on Gar's polished cherry-wood desktop, as he searched through the *Exquirer* for the balance of the cover story. When he saw the title, *Andrea Kandet Turns Cat Woman*, a laugh escaped him. The picture showed Kandet's hand only inches away from the cheek of what the article described as an "innocent female reporter." The reporter had a long red scratch down her cheek, and her mouth was hanging open in a capital "O." North wasn't facing the camera, but his hand was squarely on Kandet's shoulder, as if he was trying to pull her back. The caption below the picture read, *Keith North trying to get a hand on his fiancée's temper*.

Fiancée? When did that happen? And why? Not that he had any direct financial interest in the pair. His money was tied up elsewhere. But he was still in charge of the Agite corporate holdings, which included Unity, and the studio had capital invested in a Civil War film, *After the Grey Fell*, starring both of them. The producer should've told him about their engagement. Unity didn't need to be dragged down by another Kandet and North breakup fiasco.

Jake pulled the paper closer and examined the reporter. Damned if she didn't look like Rene. Long dark hair, dark-skinned, same facial features, even about the same height. His eyes wandered to North who seemed focused more on the reporter than Kandet. Jake smiled, tapping his fingers on the desk, considering how the events in the picture played out.

The office door opened, and Donnie walked in, running his hand through his dirty-blond hair and tugging his suit jacket into place. Several other men followed, all looking as though they just passed through a wind tunnel.

Jake pulled his feet off the desk, tossed the magazine into the trashcan, and spun around to look at the weather. The bay window covered the wall of Gar's office, or what used to be his office. The tree leaves were turned up, their undersides showing. The sky swirled purple, orange, and pink across gray. Tornado weather. How fitting. Unusual for September, but fitting for what he was about to undertake.

Donnie's voice came from behind him. "Didn't you say the meeting was at four, no exceptions?"

Jake spun back around in the chair. “Yes, but let’s give it a few minutes, since it looks like a shit storm’s brewing.”

Several men laughed. Wade Fielding smiled from the back corner of the room, but the quick flash of his hands through the sparse hair on his head, and the sad look in his eyes, relayed something other than humor. Rene. Wade went to see her. It wasn’t surprising. Wade was like an uncle to Rene, not from blood, but from time and agreement.

Two more wind-whipped men stumbled through the door. They straightened their suit coats, muttered their apologies, and took a seat. That should be the last of them. Only fifteen men were left out of the original thirty-two. No loss, as far as Jake was concerned. Fewer men just made his job easier—less management, less paperwork, fewer things to explain.

He picked up the stack of slick white folders. They slid against each other like oil-covered plastic. Each bore the Agite Corporate logo across the top and a large black letter A or B centered in the middle.

Jake started spacing them out on the desk, some in groups of two, others in threes. If someone had told him at the start of the first meeting with Rene that things would turn out the way they had, he would’ve told them they were nuts. In fact, he probably would’ve told them Rene would wind up dead, her body dumped in Lake Erie in less than a month. But now, after he saw how everything played out and understood why Rene did what she did, he was glad nothing happened. Well, he couldn’t say nothing happened, but at least she was still alive. The rest was simply time.

“I thought you weren’t in charge any more, Jake,” Frankie said from the back of the room, his thin lips tight and his dirty brown hair sticking out at odd angles.

“Sit down and shut up,” Jake said, his voice calm, but firm.

Frankie tugged at his shirtsleeves and did as he was ordered. The rest of the men were already seated. Frankie was one of the men who surprised him. Donnie was the other. He figured they would head for Chicago, Detroit, or maybe even Las Vegas as soon as Rene slammed the door on the illegal operations and the cash flow sputtered off to nothing more than exhaust fumes. But for some reason they both stuck around. Them, and the other thirteen, mostly men from Phil’s camp, although there was four old-timers from Gar’s operation as well—all of them ready for retirement.

The coffee pot burbled from the foldout table positioned against the sidewall, beside the largest of the four gun cabinets. Irene had set out some baked goods, napkins, and Styrofoam cups. The smell of fresh ground coffee mixed with the usual cigar and cigarette smoke, a good setting for Criminals Anonymous.

Jake placed the last stack of folders on the desk. He looked over the group. They certainly didn't look like typical Mafia, but he knew they were nonetheless.

What puzzled him was how they managed to get so big without him knowing, or at least thinking, they crossed the line into the big "M." He knew their activities were criminal. He even thought of the business as a criminal enterprise. But somehow, the word "Mafia" never entered his head, at least not until Virginia said it. Well, maybe when he was in Vegas, standing at the poolside cafe, watching Gianto Matero and Frank Batose, and realized he could walk up, sit down, and have a conversation with them with little, if any, introductions required.

Jake shook his head. He knew why he didn't make the connection. He didn't want to. He knew what Phil did was illegal, and anyone working for Phil could've gone to jail. But, somehow, it felt different. People got their money back for the items they stole, and no one got hurt.

With Gar, it wasn't the same. The business turned into a big, ugly monster no one could control, or even say they owned. Innocent people got hurt. Physically, emotionally, financially—the business didn't care. It just multiplied and strengthened.

He needed to stop thinking about it, beating himself up for something he couldn't change no matter how much he might, or might not, want to. The best he could do now was figure out how to pull Rene out of what she did for him, for all of them.

Jake walked to the wall and leaned against the rough, natural oak paneling. "Rene told me to call you together."

"So she's still in charge?" Frankie asked.

Jake let the jab slide. "Yes, Rene's still in charge, but I'm second."

"Okay, so what's up?" Wade asked.

Good. At least one of them was with him. "As many of you already know, we. . .I mean, Rene transferred our business holdings over to the Agite Corporation. She did this to

legitimatize the business property and channel the profit through a corporate entity until the disposition of assets could occur.”

“Damn, Jake, you sound like a regular CEO fellow,” Donnie said.

Jake knew Donnie didn’t mean any harm. The other men laughed a little. Jake laughed along with them before he continued. “She did this for our benefit.”

“Nah,” Frankie said. “Continuing business as usual would’ve been for our benefit.”

“Okay.” Jake shrugged. “She did as much as possible under the given circumstances.”

Frankie grunted.

“What happens after this, whether you stay in business or not, whether you stay legit or not, that’s up to you, because you’ll be on your own, and the corporation won’t be involved.”

Frankie sat up in his chair. The men’s eyes, all except Wade’s, were upon him. Wade stared out the window, his jowls loose, sad, as though he was reliving something distant, past.

Jake walked over, picked up a folder, and flipped it open. “Each of our business holdings is laid out here separately on the table. There are one hundred and seven separate businesses. Some of them are worth more than a mil, some less. The ones worth more than a mil are in a folder with an A on it.” He pointed to the letter A on the front of the folder he was holding before he placed it back on the desk. “The others have a B on them. The object is to divide the holdings in the most equitable manner possible.”

The grandfather clock against the wall swung its pendulum and chimed the half-hour. Jake looked at the gun racks on the far wall. His thoughts briefly flashed across Gar’s obsession with antique weaponry, and how Gar said guns marked the past, the history of the world. “We’ll pick from these folders by seniority. Those with the most will go first.” He motioned to Wade. “Then we’ll go down the list until the one with the least seniority picks.” He motioned to Frankie.

“Does that count our time as a rollout?” Frankie asked.

“It counts your entire time in the business, even your time with Matio if you came over.”

“Okay,” Wade said. “So let’s pick.”

Jake waved him aside for a second. “When you pick, you need to understand something. If you pick a letter A, you get two. If you pick a letter B, you get three. If you mix, you only

get two. Rene opted to keep the Unity Studio stock, which I think is fair, considering she didn't need to give any of us squat."

"She, shit," Frankie said.

One of the other men, Gus, with dark blue suit an inch too short on his arms, said, "Shut the hell up, Frankie."

"Rene also tossed her t-shirt shop in Montana into the pile. She said she knew it wasn't much, but she didn't want to run it, along with the studio, while she was in prison." Jake heard the collective gasp from the men at the mention of prison, but he didn't want to stop until he got the picking process off the ground. "And she isn't going back to Montana after she gets out, so she figured someone else might benefit from the property. She also said that seeing how I ran the business while her father was sick and she's been away, I should get the first pick. I don't think any of you will object, though, since I picked the t-shirt shop as well as the two antique stores we purchased right before Gar's death."

"Jesus, Jake," Wade said. "Those are way out in Utah and Wyoming."

"I've got my reasons."

Wade shrugged.

Jake left it at that. "I also held out a casino, the one in Windsor. I need it to make a deal. Just call it part of Rene's holdings."

Turning his back to the men, Jake stared out the bay window at the row of trees lined along the back of the property. The top branches bent with each gust of wind. He wondered what happened to the woodpecker he heard during the meeting when Rene set up the terms.

"Is that it?" Wade asked.

Jake turned back around. The looks on the men's faces ranged from boredom to confusion. Only Wade's face held interest.

"No," Jake replied. "If you wind up dead or in jail before the final disposition of the property, the proceeds will get tossed into the pot. Any businesses not selected will be sold and the money, as well as the money the corporation makes during the disposition process, will be split among the balance of the men, anyone ranking as a supervisor or higher working beneath each of you. This will occur according to a distribution schedule Rene set up based on seniority. It should amount to anywhere from fifty to two hundred grand each."

The men mumbled, and the coffee pot gurgled. Jake wondered which of the men would set up another operation, and which would pull out altogether.

“Rene considered it only fair,” he said. “But you should let all of the guys working under you know the same deal applies to them if they wind up dead or in jail.”

After walking back to the wall, Jake turned and said, “Oh, and if any of you want to hear about Rene, just stick around afterwards, and I’ll tell you.”

The men sat in their chairs, talking among themselves. Jake called their names and each moved forward, sifted through the folders, and made their selections. Frankie was the only one who grumbled. “Shit. I wanted one of those cathouses. I was planning on moving to Nevada.”

Donnie, the one who pulled both of them and a Las Vegas antique shop out of the stack, said, “Tough shit. You’ll just have to come and visit like any other John.”

Both Frankie and Donnie walked out the door haggling over discounts. The rest of the men stayed. Jake sat down, took a deep breath, and told them about Rene.

Chapter 37

J.S.

J.S. wrinkled his nose when he stepped into Darby's office. The place had the sweet, yet nauseating smell of fresh paint. He wondered who in their right mind would choose such a piss-ass shade of green, a cross between puke peas and fluorescent lime.

The rest of the small office looked the same—a gray metal desk, a trash heap of files, and two beat up file cabinets. One cabinet had its top drawer hanging open with a file poking out, cocked at an angle. The blinds were open, but a small desk lamp cast a dim yellow light.

Darby sat behind his desk with a telephone receiver in his hand and a neither-here-nor-there look on his face. His carrot red hair was mussed, and his shirt looked like overdue laundry.

J.S. stepped forward, shoved a stack of files aside, and placed his palms on the desk. "We need to talk. Now."

"Let me call you back," Darby said to the person on the other end of the line. He listened for a second and said, "Okay," before he hung up and spoke to J.S. "You really shouldn't barge into my office. I was on a confidential call."

"I didn't barge. I walked. Your secretary wasn't at her desk."

Darby's eyes darted to the open door and back. "Okay, so what do you need?"

J.S. reached inside his jacket, pulled out a newspaper, and placed it on the desk. "See this?" His finger landed in the middle of the page. "Your friend promised me this wasn't going to happen. That he'd make sure it didn't."

Darby picked up the paper, looked at it, and tossed it back onto the desk. "What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Get your friend on the phone."

"I can't do that."

J.S. moved closer and lowered his voice. "Look, you may think I'm stupid, but I've learned a lot in my pissy-ass life. And one thing I learned is people like you are just as dirty as the rest of us, even if your butt's planted behind a desk." J.S. stood, letting his full height tower above Darby. He picked up the wooden desk placard from the edge of the desk. "You may

even think you're special just because you have the words 'Parole Officer' carved into this little piece of wood." He flipped the plaque over and returned it to the desk. "But when you get right down to it, we both know you're just as easy to bribe as the next fellow."

Darby leaned back in the chair and folded his hands in his lap. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

J.S. laughed. Either Darby was stupid, or he was playing a hardy-har-har number. "No, I think somebody's already done that."

A brief flash of surprise crossed Darby's face. "What do you mean?"

"Simple. You used your power to push me together with some guy we both know doesn't have shit to do with the FBI like he said he did. Because if he did, this," his finger hit the center of the newspaper again, "wouldn't have happened. The man could've made sure it didn't."

"Maybe he couldn't. Maybe other things got in the way."

"Couldn't? Oh, I figure he could've, but he just didn't. In fact, I figure he's probably in deeper than Rene's old man ever thought about being."

Darby squinted and shifted in his seat. "If you're saying I'm somehow connected with the mob, then I don't appreciate the implication."

J.S. kept his eyes level with Darby. He didn't need to yell. He didn't even need to get himself all jacked up. The plain old truth was enough. "Doesn't matter where you are or you aren't. What matters is how the press might look at all of this. What kind of headlines it might make."

"Nobody's going to believe an—"

"What? An ex-con?" J.S. laughed until he felt his stomach cinch, and he wrapped around his waist. "You aren't thinking right. Did you forget who I work for? Or did you just forget about how rich he is, or how many reporters follow him around begging for a morsel like this to fall out of his mouth?"

"They still won't believe you."

"Really? You think so?" He let a slow dog smile cross his face before he shrugged, picked up the newspaper, and tucked it back in his pocket. "If you're okay with it, I'm okay with it. We'll just let it happen, see how everything works out, see how many reporters hit your

office, how many questions the Parole Authority have once their phones start ringing. Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm knee-deep in stupid, and nobody'll give a shit." He turned to leave.

"What do you want?" Darby asked, his voice high and tight, choking over his own words.

That's better, J.S. thought. He turned to face Darby again. "I want the phone number.

"I can't do that. There's more involved in this than you realize, but it has nothing to do with the mob."

"Nothing?"

"Not the way you think, and I can't tell you the full scope. I don't even know everything. Only what they told me."

J.S. considered what Darby was saying. If he pushed for the truth, he might wind up losing what he really wanted. "Okay, you call him and have him call me at the ranch." He glanced at his watch. "I'll be there in about an hour, and I'll wait until five. That's four hours from now."

Darby sat there, his face bunched like a wadded up piece of paper, crow's feet at the corners of his eyes. The air-conditioner kicked on and blew cold air from the ceiling vent.

J.S. said, "If I don't hear from him, I'd better hear from you. If not, I'll call my boss and ask him to set up a press conference. No big deal."

He had no idea if Keith would go for something like that. He honestly didn't care. Whether Keith was willing to help him didn't matter. His year was up. He could go to Ohio and start flapping his jaw around. Maybe he could even testify, and the judge could check his prison record. Find out his release wasn't exactly on the square. He could probably do a hundred or more things if he set his head to it.

When he stepped outside, the sun struck the arms of his jacket and made him feel warm inside. Even if he didn't like the reason he had to come back, he was still glad he did. Montana Septembers were nice. They smelled like fresh pine in the afternoon and charcoaled wood at night. The air touched his skin like a cool bath. It was a pleasant change from L.A.'s smog and hot pavement.

If it didn't mean leaving Keith up a telephone pole with his butt sitting on a wire, he'd just stay in Montana. Unless Rene needed him back in Ohio. Then, he'd go in a heartbeat. But, whether Rene needed him or not, Keith was dealing with way too much shit for a white boy to

handle on his own. Dumping Andrea was a smart move. Probably the most sensible thing Keith did since they landed in Los Angeles. He was still drinking, though. And the reporters were being a major pain in the ass. They sprayed questions like machine gun fire. “Why’d Keith do it?” “How bad was her temper?” “How’d she treat you?” “Does Keith have a new woman?”

Why ask him? Why ask any of Keith’s employees? He never could figure out the fuss. Keith made movies. Either people liked them, or they didn’t. Keith’s personal life shouldn’t have fiddly-do with it.

J.S. shook his head and started to climb into the Bronco until a motorcycle roared past, turned around, and skidded to a stop with the smell of hot engine oil beside him. He couldn’t see who the driver was until the helmet came off and long brown hair tumbled out.

The first words out of her mouth were, “Why’d you let my plants die?”

“What the. . .you just got busted for racketeering, and you’re worried about your plants?”

Rene laughed. Her brown eyes shone like high-gloss onyx. “Well, I was sort of attached to them, and I did leave you in charge of them.”

“You also told me to keep an eye on Keith. How’d you figure I could manage both at the same time?”

“Well, I suppose you’re right. My plants are a tough crowd. So, what’re you doing here? I thought Keith was in Los Angeles.”

J.S. looked at the pavement. She wasn’t going to like him leaving Keith on his own, especially since he promised he wouldn’t. But he couldn’t lie to her, either. That wasn’t part of the deal. “He’s still there. I just had to come back to take care of a few things at the ranch and talk to my parole officer.”

Rene rubbed her neck. “You’re going back, though, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, but why aren’t you in jail? I thought they arrested you.”

Rene laughed. “They did, but you’d be surprised how fast you can make bail if you have a crap-load of money.”

J.S. already knew she inherited her father’s estate. Every newspaper from L.A. to Tokyo talked about it. What the business involved, the dollar figures, everything. “So why’d your father leave it all to you? And why are you riding a motorcycle? Doesn’t seem natural.”

“Don’t ask me. But it’s all mine, at least for the time being. I put one of the properties up for collateral and got permission to come to Montana so I could move my stuff back to Ohio. And I’m riding a motorcycle because I felt like riding a motorcycle.”

“Why would you wanna do that?”

“Do what? Move back to Ohio? Or ride a motorcycle?”

J.S. laughed. “Both.”

Rene didn’t answer. Instead, she turned, her eyes flitting up the mountains, as though her thoughts wanted to run away, maybe hide in the daisy field of clouds dotting the blue sky above them. “I have to make a trip to Vegas just for the heck of it. Maybe to check on something. I’m not really sure yet. But I have to go to L.A. to sign some papers, so I figure, why not? Vegas is on the way. Sort of.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Don’t worry. It isn’t important. I just have to make a few arrangements before I . . . well, before it gets more difficult for me to manage things.”

“Prison.” J.S. waved his arms in frustration. “You mean before you go to prison. Why’d you go and do such a dumb-ass thing?” He jabbed his finger to his chest. “You should’ve just let me stay where I was at, or let them put me back rather than sticking your neck out. And, yeah, I know how all of it happened. I know what you did.”

Rene shook her head. “No, you don’t. This has nothing to do with you. I mean, yeah, I cut a deal to get you out of prison, but the rest? Nope. Nothing. Whether I went back to Ohio or not, I still would’ve wound up with the business, and they would’ve nailed me for racketeering.” She shrugged. “Maybe that’s why dear old dad left me everything. It only took me a few weeks to get the illegal part shut down, but even owning it for a day made me a mob boss.”

“So what are you gonna do? I mean, how do you plan to get around it? You aren’t guilty of anything. You didn’t even want—”

“Look, I hate to do this, but I really can’t stay. I only have permission to be gone for a few weeks and since I decided to drive rather than fly, I need to get moving. Actually, I didn’t even think you were here, but I suppose it’s a good thing you are.” She reached into her hip pocket, pulled something out, and tried to hand it to him. “Here.”

“What is it?”

“A key. Keith gave it to me before I left. You can give it back to him.”

“I’m not taking it. You need to give it back to him yourself, if that’s what you wanna do.”

Rene’s dark eyes flashed him a puzzled look. “But he’s—”

“I don’t care how big of a hurry you’re in, you’re coming back to the ranch with me, and have a cup of coffee before you take off. A few more minutes isn’t going to kill you, and from the sound of things, I may not be seeing you for quite a while.”

Besides, he needed to talk some sense into her. If he couldn’t, then he sure as shit needed to straighten her out about at least one thing before her little brown butt wound up in prison, and she regretted it, or regretted not doing it, every sorry-ass day she sat there.

Chapter 38

Keith

Keith felt like a scarecrow nailed up in a cornfield. He held his arms straight out at his sides, as his wardrobe person, Joanne Klitch, tugged at the rough gray wool of the Confederate uniform he was wearing, pulling the waist tighter. His percussion musket lay across the veneer counter with its muzzle pointed toward the small foldout sofa at one end of the trailer. His slouch hat and haversack were positioned across the butt of the rifle. The overhead lights glared at suntan level. "Shut the damned lights off, will you?"

Joanne muttered, "Just a minute," around the straight pins held between her lips. "We're almost done."

"I certainly hope so. I'm sweating to death, and my arms are going numb."

The air-conditioner was cranked to ten, but that didn't stop the vinyl-sided trailer from smelling like scorched metal. A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead to his lips, and he licked it away, tasting the salt. He felt as though he was still on the set, crouched in tall field grass with the mid-September sun beating down on him. Hot. It was just too damned hot.

Southern California might be a good location for year-round filming, but the temperatures were enough to make a person, especially someone who spent the last four hours in full civil war gear, boil over. Not to mention the irritation factor. Four hours working on one fifteen-minute take was enough to make anyone's blood pressure hit stroke level.

"Okay," Joanne said. "You can put your arms down now, but I need you to turn and face me."

Keith dropped his arms and reached for the light switch, but Joanne said, "No, I need the lights on so I can see what I'm doing. You don't want me to shove a pin in you, do you?"

"No, but I need to live through it."

"Oh, quit whining and turn around. I need you to pull your belt off, so I can check the darts. If you keep losing weight, I'm going to have to tighten the whole costume."

Keith yanked the buckle open and tugged off the belt and sash. Joanne was right. He was losing too much weight. In less than a month, he dropped from one hundred seventy-two to one hundred fifty-eight pounds. If it weren't for his five foot ten inch height and the particular

character he was playing, such a decrease might be a problem. But, in this instance, it worked. The reduction matched the life of the Confederate private he was playing, starved and dragged through constant battles.

Joanne unbuttoned his fly and knelt down before him. Her hands pulled the front of his pants forward, pinching the darts and tightening the waistband. Just as she stuck the first pin threw the material, the trailer door banged open.

The pin slipped, jabbing him hard in the stomach. “Hey! Go easy down there.” He rubbed the sting on his stomach, ignoring the door.

Joanne leaned forward, trying to pull the straight pin out from inside his trousers. He put his hand on her head to push her away just as he looked to see Andrea standing with her arms folded across her chest. Shit. All he needed was another confrontation with her. She’d been nothing but an irritated cockatiel all morning.

Andrea’s face flared red against the white, hooped and ruffled costume she was wearing. Her eyes narrowed. “Exactly what the hell do you think you’re doing?” She reached for Joanne’s shoulder.

Joanne jumped up, her mousy brown curls bouncing and her auburn eyes darting around like a bird caught in a vise.

Slapping Andrea’s hand away from Joanne, Keith zipped his pants up. “What the hell do you think you’re doing barging into my trailer?”

Andrea’s eyes moved from his crotch to Joanne. “Why you little slut!”

“I was just—” Joanne started.

“Fixing my costume, Andrea,” Keith finished, motioning Joanne to leave. “She was fixing my costume, if it’s any of your business.”

Joanne grabbed her alteration kit and ran from the trailer. Her high, nervous voice followed her. “I’ll get the coat and pants later.”

“Andrea, you really need to get a grip.” Keith ran his hand through his hair. He was beginning to think his personal trailer was a boxing ring. Every day, a different match, but always the same opponent. He wondered what the new round would amount to. Would it be about the first time he broke things off with her for throwing a fit at Conzella’s? Or the second

time when she clawed a female reporter for asking him questions? Or something even less substantial?

“You cut me off in dialogue three times during the last take.” Andrea flung her hand up in the air, knocking a comb out of her hair, causing it to stick out on the side.

Ah, a continuation of the morning bitchery. Keith walked over, sat down in the leather office chair, and rubbed his stomach where the straight pin jabbed him. “I wouldn’t have cut you off, if you hadn’t been rambling.”

“Rambling?” Andrea’s voice boomeranged off the paneled walls, making his head throb. “Rambling, my ass!”

“Well, it certainly wasn’t acting.”

As far as he could tell, Andrea’s acting ability was on a roller coaster plunge, something in motion long before he returned from Montana. Her downslide was one of the reasons he so adamantly opposed signing her on after his co-star, Elizabeth Hutter, got injured in a car accident. Another was Andrea’s appearance. She lacked Elizabeth’s innocent facial features—a requirement for the part of Annalou, a young southern belle. Plus, her temperament sucked. She pouted whenever a line didn’t suit her, and she yelled if another cast member fumbled a word or a crewmember made the slightest slip. They spent an hour listening to her degrade her hairdresser over a misarranged curl.

Half of the cast and crew were already pissed off by the delays. If she kept up the temper tantrums, they wouldn’t finish filming until December.

“Who the hell are you to tell me what’s acting and what’s not? It’s not like you have an Oscar to your credit.”

“Well, I know enough to know you’ve been acting like a complete and total bitch ever since we started shooting.”

“I wonder why.” She put her finger to her mouth. “Could it be because you set me up with the press? Made me look like an idiot breaking up with me in public?”

Keith bent over and pulled on one of his boots. If she wasn’t going to leave, he was. “I didn’t have a damned thing to do with you looking like an idiot. You’re the one who started screaming at Conzella’s when I asked the waitress a question about the murals. You’re also the

one who went after the reporter. She was just asking me about the film, and you turned it into something it wasn't."

Their split had nothing to do with the piss-poor acting job Andrea was producing on the set, or the problems she had with the press. Andrea managed to alienate the press all by herself. She treated them like garbage. Then she wondered why they set off enough flashbulbs to light up the Oakland A's stadium when she clawed the reporter.

"Fuck you!"

"No, thanks. We've already been through that." Keith pulled on his second boot and stood up. He needed to talk with Pance, and see what he could do about keeping Andrea out of his trailer.

Andrea slapped him. "You think you're going to step on me?"

Keith rubbed his jaw. "I never intended to do anything to you except get my career back off the ground."

"Well, get this." She shoved her finger in his face. "You may have slept with me. You may have dumped me. You may have gotten your high old jollies off of it. But this is business. And I won't let you ruin my career. Nor will I stand by while you screw every last woman working on the set. You'd better start respecting me, or I'll see you fired."

The trailer rattled when she slammed the door on her way out. Keith picked up a jar sitting on his dressing table and flung it at the door. He knew he was hard on her on the set. But damn it all anyway, she was acting like a bitch. No, she was acting like she owned him again. Getting jealous over any woman he talked with, whether he slept with them or just hung out with them. It wasn't like he screwed every last woman on the set. Only one. And that hadn't amounted to much. She was a production assistant, and neither one of them thought the affair would last more than a day or two.

Besides, he didn't need to take any shit from Andrea. They weren't together. He could be with anybody he wanted.

And who'd she think she was telling him she was going to get him fired? She was one they needed to fire. If it wasn't for her, they'd be two weeks from completion rather than two and a half months.

Keith shoved the door open. It slapped the painted metal sides of the trailer, bounced back, and hit him in the chest. “Shit!” He kicked the frame until it stood open, crumbled like a wadded and un-wadded piece of paper.

The afternoon sun swallowed him. He let off a string of profanities. Several people looked up, their mouths gaping open. A golf cart dodged around him, squealing its tires and tipping at the maneuver. He could hear the slap of tennis shoes against pavement behind him.

“Wait a minute!” Tom Bennett, his production assistant, shouted.

“I’m leaving,” he yelled over his shoulder.

“You can’t.”

“Watch me.” Keith kept on walking.

The tennis shoes stopped. Tom’s voice echoed across the lot. “Pance won’t like this.”

Keith turned, walking backward, and said, “Tell him to sue me,” before he turned back around and continued onward.

They couldn’t change characters this late without re-shooting the film, and he needed a break before he wound up snapping Andrea’s neck. He’d already broken things off with Andrea before they’d started filming, and if Edward Pance hadn’t told him to make nice with her again, they might be past all of this now. But Pance wanted him to makeup with her, go a few places with her, get the right pictures taken, and promote the film. He did it, but things didn’t turn out any better. It only made Andrea think she owned him again.

He put up with Andrea twice to make a go of his career, but he wasn’t going to do it any more. He couldn’t say screwing and dumping her hadn’t been a pleasure. It had. Would he do it again? Not for all the scotch in Scotland.

The press didn’t blame him for his and Andrea’s breakup. Instead, they went after her. Just as hard as they went after him two years ago. Every day he saw a new picture in the tabloids showing her chewing somebody a new asshole.

Keith jumped in his Porsche, started it, and slammed the gears as he sped through the production lot. He ground to a stop when he reached the security booth. Harry, one of the security guards, was pushing a woman, maybe twenty-years-old or so, with dirt-brown hair, long legs and an 80’s hairdo back from in front of the gate. Another woman, a blonde with big

tits, presumably a friend of the first, stood off to the side. Both of them were trying to slide around Harry.

“Just a minute, Mr. North,” Harry said. “I’ll be right with you.”

The woman with the long legs and dirt-brown hair said, “Nobody’ll know. We’ll be good. We just want to get a look at the *Darkness at Night* set.”

Keith revved the Porsche, throwing exhaust into the air. The blonde with big tits stared at him with curious, light-colored, maybe green, eyes.

“Hey,” Keith said.

“Hey back.” The blonde walked over to the car.

“You and your friend want to come with me?”

“You bet,” she said, motioning her friend over.

Both women squeezed into the passenger seat and he took off. He dropped them off at their car, and sprinted off with them following close behind. Dinner. A few bars. A little fun. Maybe, if he was lucky, he could forget about Andrea. If not, he’d have to figure something else out.

Chapter 39

Rene and Keith

Rene tightened her knees against the gas tank of the Ducati motorcycle. She felt like a strange bird in an outward dive with her body laid flat against the seat and her arms stretched forward, separating time and space, making the split between her past and present. A golden light pattern dappled the horizon, announcing Los Angeles against a dark backdrop of land and the endless invisible ocean farther to the west. Cool, dry air washed over her, carrying the faint smell of diesel fumes from the semi-trailer a mile ahead. The bike vibrated against her blue-jean covered thighs.

She thought the Ducati would overheat with the change in altitude and climate, but she was wrong. It performed flawlessly, loping along the pavement like a lioness in chase. Eighteen hours from the cool, high altitudes of Montana and Idaho to the blazing hot depths of Salt Lake, and then on to Vegas to stop by the Pharaoh.

The side-trip, although important, proved useless. She wanted to talk with Gianto Matero, who owned and, by everything she'd heard, housed his operations from the Pharaoh. If Matero hired the two goons who chased her down and gave her the tape recorder that day at the cemetery six months earlier, then perhaps finding him, or at least talking with him, might produce the goons or more information.

A roundabout way of doing things, she realized, but what choice did she have? She needed them. To keep their promise, if goons actually kept promises, and make certain she didn't wind up dead, they had to follow her. If they weren't tailing her full-time, then perhaps they were on a part-time basis.

It wasn't surprising when the tape recorder Rancey's conspirators pulled from her went AWOL. After her arrest, she asked the police about it. Several times. But no one showed the least bit of concern.

The agent who'd slammed her on the Formica tabletop at the diner handed her off to a burly Sergeant with the Cleveland Police Department, who'd led her handcuffed to the booking area. There, the sergeant passed her off to a tall, bread-loaf of a woman with tight nappy hair. The woman strip searched her, placed her against a smudged white wall, and

handed her a black plastic plaque. Snap. They photographed her. Press and roll. They fingerprinted her. No mention of the tape recording, or who she might talk with about it.

She was a criminal. Her rights narrowed to the bread-loaf woman steering her by the elbow into a small room smelling like freshly mopped ammonia. Indicating a metal chair in front of a Ma Bell special, the woman said, “One call. Ten minutes.” Nothing else.

She called Jake. Even bearing in mind what happened before her father’s death, she still considered Jake her best bet. Besides, he owed her. It was his ass she was trying to save. Well, his and the others.

When he answered the telephone, at first, his voice faltered, and she wondered if she made a mistake. But after she repeated herself, he told her not to worry. That he’d take care of it and have her out as soon as the judge set bail.

A click of the receiver brought the bread loaf woman back to handcuff her again and lead her down gritty tiled hallways, through the maze of bars, caged rats. She could still smell the wet towels and hear the voices shouting and sobbing in the background. The woman’s nightstick slapped at her thick thighs, and her keys clinked with each solid step.

It didn’t take long before Rene found herself sitting in a jail cell, staring at the water-stained green walls. The only difference between her and the other women was federal court. Well, that, and the financial means to make bail. They were still the same in the sense they were all waiting for lawyers, judges and whatever justice might pass their way.

The best she could do was collect evidence. The possibility Matero or the goons might have something—tape recordings, paperwork trails, maybe even pictures of Rancey collecting his pay-offs—was slim. But it was worth a shot.

It took her two weeks after she made bail to hit Vegas. There, she sped down the strip, straight for the Pharaoh and, and with it, Matero. When she swung the glass doors open, the casino ring-clicked its slot machines and tumble-thudded its dice across felt covered crap tables while she made her way to the smooth marble and brass-trimmed offices overlooking the pits. At first, she felt confident standing in front of Matero’s high-heeled secretary, whose long smooth fingernails matched her legs. But once the woman buzzed an intercom and said, “Some woman’s here to see Gio, and she says she’s Rene Matio, but she looks kinda ratty,” Rene felt her stomach flip.

A man with mocha skin and a steamroller body covered in Italian silk appeared. He walked around her, his eyes moving over her body in careful scrutiny, as though she might be a bomb-strapped suicidal gambler coming to complain about her losses. One touch, one jiggle, and boom.

“You have any ID?” he asked.

She reached into her back pocket and produced her Montana driver’s license.

The man took the laminated card from her outstretched hand. He studied it, and then her. “I’m sorry, Ms. Matio, but Mr. Matero isn’t here at the moment.”

Rene didn’t let it go. Couldn’t. Questions tumbled from her mouth. When would Mr. Matero return? How could she contact him? Who might be able to tell her about the men he assigned to her? Did they have any information on a federal agent by the name of Rancey?

Each question brought the same response, “Mr. Matero isn’t available to answer your questions,” until she gave up and made her way out the same way she came in.

Oh well, things could’ve turned out worse. She could be dead—tossed in the Cuyahoga River, dumped in a ditch, buried in the woods, or any number of disposal methods. But she wasn’t, and she had Jake to thank for that. Bungled hit against her or not, he had every opportunity, both before and after her father’s death, to get rid of her, but he hadn’t. He couldn’t. No more than she could let Rancey put him in prison. Their past was shared, and the only thing either one of them could do was accept it and move on.

Jake had arranged for her bond and hired her attorney. She’d thanked him and decided to let her attorney handle the court process. Schedule her court date—even though she insisted on no delays—collect her evidence, subpoena her witnesses, and pick her jury.

The only question now was whether she could move on with her life, and forget about the past. J.S. was right. She blocked her own happiness, prevented herself from experiencing any satisfaction that might put her at risk of feeling responsible for another human being. She already felt responsible for too many screwed up lives.

Rene pressed her body closer to the gas tank as she took the turn from Hollywood Boulevard onto Laurel Canyon. The aroma of enchiladas and spiced beef from the Mexican restaurant she passed stayed with her. The streets wound through a collage of mansions. Southern plantations. Mediterranean oasis. Art deco. Any design money could buy.

She felt like a mouse chasing through an experimental maze, looking for the triumph bell. Up, down, around, back again. Ding. At last, she found what she was looking for.

The three-story mansion was dark, but the wrought-iron gate stood open. She coasted up the half-circle driveway until she came to a stop in front the stoop set off by towering white pillars. Her bike idled, its motor rumbling at a low decibel, vibrating her body, while she looked around.

Neatly trimmed lawn surrounded by a cement wall covered in ivy. Appropriately placed trees and shrubs. Yep, this was it. Everything was just like she remembered.

Squinting, she peered up the driveway. The outline of what looked like an older Chevy Malibu was parked near the end of the loop leading back to the garage.

Odd, she thought, as she swung her leg over the seat, pulled off her helmet, and threw the kickstand. She looked around, finger combing her hair. Keith's Porsche was nowhere in sight. Maybe he wasn't there. Or maybe the Porsche was in the garage. The Malibu probably belonged to Mrs. Bumbe, the housekeeper J.S. mentioned.

Her eyes moved to the white door and the huge brass knocker. Her heart beat hard. Maybe she should forget about it, jump on her bike, and hit a hotel instead. It wasn't like she and Keith had a relationship before she left Montana. Heck, the most they had between them was a few dates. Okay, more than a few.

Her forehead furrowed as she tried to count the number of times they went out. After a few seconds, she gave up. She didn't know which ones counted as dates since there were so many times they went places or hung out together she couldn't qualify. They felt like something. She just wasn't sure what.

Still, they never took things further, so she didn't owe him an explanation or. . . , well, crap, that wasn't true, either. Her first visit to Los Angeles—how could she forget? The hair on her body prickled just at the thought of how he satisfied her. Chemistry. Pure chemistry.

So, what was she afraid of? She didn't need to worry about getting overly involved with him or her father bumping him off. She was going to prison, and her father was dead.

Rene glanced at her clothing. Riding a Ducati in a dress with pants underneath felt more than a little silly, but showing up on Keith's doorstep in sweaty biker gear would've felt worse.

She was sure of it, so she hit the women's restroom at the Amoco, washed up, and changed into something a more appropriate. Now she was glad she had.

The lightweight spandex dress was the only clean thing she had left. It was okay, but not on the Ducati. Well, probably not on any motorcycle. It was short, and she had no way to keep it from riding up. Wearing pants underneath was the only solution she could come up with. Wear them while riding. Take them off when she arrived.

Why hadn't she packed better? Heck, she didn't even pack enough undergarments. Probably because her mind wasn't on clothing when she left Ohio and later, Montana. It was more on Matero and what type of help she might solicit from him. That, and getting to Unity Studios to announce the stock changeover. With the controlling stock vote, her father made himself CEO when the last CEO's contract expired, and she needed to deal with the aftermath.

She didn't know much about running a studio, but she wanted to try. She had enough money to buy out the remaining stockholders, if they didn't want to take a gamble on her. Or she should say if they didn't want to take a gamble on Jake since she planned to sign limited power of attorney papers for him to handle business decisions during her absence. Really, they shouldn't have a problem with Jake being in charge. He'd been in charge, in some aspect or another, ever since her father took over, and the other stockholders seemed satisfied with the him.

But she couldn't ignore the consequences her prison sentence might have on the studio. She needed to order her controlling interest to stay under wraps until further notice. They didn't need the press slamming them around any more than necessary.

Clothing, or the lack of it, didn't even enter her head until she hit the Los Angeles city limits and made the decision to see Keith. By then, it was midnight. Scarcely a good time for shopping. She knew she would have to pick up something before she went to Unity. Spandex, jeans or leather scarcely seemed appropriate for a new female CEO. She just thought she'd have more time to deal with the matter.

All right, all ready, she thought, enough about business and clothing. It was time to either get on with it, or hop on her bike and leave. Leaving didn't seem reasonable. Not after she just spent the last hour getting there.

Okay, so get it together. Bending down, she pulled her pants and tennis shoes off. Then, she opened her knapsack and dug around. She pulled out her sandals and a brush. A few swipes, and she'd be ready, or at least as ready as she was going to get.

The pants, shoes and brush went back into the knapsack before she flung it over her shoulder. The weight tugged hard against her as she climbed the steps to the door. Her helmet hung from her hand. The front porch lights were off. The doorbell glowed orange.

Should she ring it? Her mind raced over the possibilities. She imagined an irritated black woman from Alabama named Mrs. Bumbe coming to the door to scold her for showing up so late.

Evoking the wrath of a woman she didn't know wasn't a relishing prospect. So, she dropped her knapsack on the porch, felt around inside the front pocket, and retrieved the key Keith gave her nearly a year ago.

She flung the knapsack back over her shoulder, shoved the key into the lock, and gave it a twist. Click. The door popped open like a gun hammer, cocked and ready for the pull. The scent of lemons or lemon oil wafted out. The foyer was dim, but not completely dark. Enough moonlight filtered through the windows for her to see the layout. If she recalled correctly, the room Keith put her in the last time she visited was up the stairs to the right.

Rene shifted the weight of the knapsack and stepped inside. It shouldn't take long to locate the staircase. If memory served her, the grand room was to left and the staircase wound up from the center.

A short distance through the foyer, she bumped into something. She stopped, grabbed at the top of what looked like an aloe plant, hip-high and embedded in a clay pot. It stabilized, but her halted footsteps brought the faint sound of music. She stood still. Another second passed, and she heard Keith's voice, or at least what sounded like it.

Looking around the corner, she saw a light at the end of a long hallway, leading to what she thought she remembered as the recreation room. As she approached, the music got louder. The door stood open, so she stepped inside, but her feet froze, and her mouth popped open. She didn't think she could've picked worse timing if she'd tried.

Keith was sitting on the sofa with two half naked women, girls really, maybe nineteen, maybe twenty, hanging all over him. One woman, a blonde with short, straight silky hair,

straddled his lap. The other woman, a brunette with shoulder length moppy hair, had her arm draped across the back of the sofa. All three of them were talking softly and laughing.

Maybe if she moved quietly, she could back out without anyone noticing her. She took a step back and turned. Only one more step and she'd be out the door, into the hallway, and on her way.

She took a second step. One of the women spoke. "Who's that?"

"Hey!" Keith's louder and more commanding voice came after.

Crap! Rene wondered how many times she'd curse herself before she got out of there. Running for it might work. Maybe they couldn't catch her before she hit the front door, jumped on her bike, and sped away.

No, that wouldn't work. Keith might call the police. She could explain, but the police showing up wasn't something she needed, especially now.

Taking a deep breath, Rene turned to let Keith see who barged into his home in the middle of the night. "Umm, sorry for the intrusion. The house was dark, and I didn't think anyone would be up this late, so I let myself in." The words poured from her mouth so fast she wanted to slap her hand over her lips just to make herself quit babbling. But the look on Keith's face made the words come out even faster. "I wouldn't have done that, except. . . well, I've been riding for quite a while, a couple of days, and I wasn't thinking clearly, or I would've rung the bell before barging in like this. It was very thoughtless of me, and I'm really sorry for interrupting, but I'll be going now."

She took another step backwards. Keith jumped from the sofa. His chest was bare and his hair ruffled. His pants were unzipped.

She blinked for a second before her tongue loosened, and she threw up a hand. "No, don't bother. I'll see myself back to the door and let myself out. I found my way here, so I'm sure I can find my way out. No trouble whatsoever. Just forget I was here," she finished before she turned to leave.

"No, wait a minute," Keith said.

Ignore it and keep walking, she mentally commanded herself.

"Rene, wait a minute! Don't just walk out like that!"

She froze. Now what? She didn't want to stand in the hallway looking like an idiot, and she certainly didn't feel like turning the threesome into a foursome, but she also didn't want to make things difficult for J.S. by irritating Keith any more than she already had.

Taking deep breath, Rene turned to face him. "Look, I'm sorry. I'll just go, and you can—"

"No," Keith said, his voice firm. His pants were now zipped. "I told you to come anytime you wanted. I just—" He turned to look to the room and the women he just left behind. "Give me a minute and don't leave."

Rene didn't say anything.

Keith held his ground. "Okay?"

Crap! "Okay," she said.

She would've said anything to relieve the tension, but the walls felt as though they were tightening around her. She looked down the hallway. It was only fifty feet or so to the door. Maybe she could still make a run for it, pretend nothing ever happened, let Keith get back to the women.

Her stomach tightened. She could feel her heart beating below her jaw line. A clock chimed, and she jumped. Perspiration broke out on her forehead. The pendulum went back to its steady tic-tock as she stood, iced into place. Behind her, she could hear muffled voices and movement.

The women appeared. They were tousled, but fully clothed. Keith followed with his hands on the base of the blonde's spine.

"Hi, ya," the brunette said in a cheerful voice. The distinct smell of lavender seeped from her clothing as she passed.

At least she didn't sound irritated. "Hello," Rene said. "I'm really sorry for the interruption."

"I'll bet," the blonde said, her high-pitched voice radiating sarcasm, and her glare delivering a distinct slap to the face.

Rene couldn't blame her. Being evicted in the middle of the night didn't exactly rate as a scrapbook memorabilia moment, especially considering more enjoyable things were already stirred and ready for action.

Keith held up an index finger, indicating he'd return in a second, or a minute. Rene wasn't sure which, but she nodded and looked at the floor. The marble sparkled against the moonlight. She could hear the front door click open, and Keith muttering apologies. One of the women, most likely the blonde judging by the voice, said something Rene couldn't quite make out, but the tone didn't sound happy. Keith's voice followed. The woman's again.

All Rene could hear her mind spitting out was: crap, crap, crap. How could she be so stupid? She should've called first, no matter what J.S. said. In fact, why hadn't he called? Or at least suggested it? Surely, he knew the situation, what type of thing she might walk in on. Or maybe he assumed she wouldn't be so thickheaded as to show up unannounced.

The door closed. Bare feet slapped against the marble, and Keith reappeared, passing her. "Are you coming?" His voice sounded terse.

Rene figured she didn't have much choice since he just tossed two of his ménage à trois out, and she was the only one left, looking like an idiot standing in the hallway. So she stepped back inside the doorway and stood, fingering her motorcycle helmet, while Keith went to the bar.

"Drink?" he asked.

"Yes, please."

Keith raked his hand through his hair and pulled a lightweight cotton shirt on before he pulled a glass from the small freezer beneath the bar. His hands fumbled across the shelf for the bottle of scotch. The amber liquid put off a slight sizzle when it hit the frosted glass.

Keith felt his hand tremble and wondered why the hell he felt so nervous. Scratch that. He knew why. Rene was now standing in front of him after how long? A year? No, not quite. Since last December.

Keith walked over and held the glass out to her. She took it, and he returned to the bar to fix another for himself. Rene brought the glass to her cheeks—first one, and then the other—rolling the cold etched crystal against her skin until it glistened with moisture. The glass moved to her lips, and the J&B disappeared in one solid gulp.

She grimaced. "Thanks, I needed that."

"No problem."

Keith wanted to feel mad at her. Not for walking in on him. Sending the ladies home wasn't an issue since there were plenty of women who'd take their place, if he wanted. What irritated him was Rene not contacting him since she left for Ohio. A year without a telephone call, note, message through J.S., nothing to let him know if she was okay.

J.S. would've let him know if something catastrophic happened to her. But as for how she was doing, he had no idea, and he asked, at least a dozen times over the first several months. The usual response from J.S. was something like, "Nope. I haven't heard shit from her."

There were times when he wondered if J.S. was telling the truth, but after a while, it didn't matter. He just quit asking.

Keith took a drink and set his glass on the bar. Rene's eyes darted from the floor to the door to him, startled, like a frightened puppy. Still, they were the same smoky gray that nearly drove him to the point of stuttering on more than one occasion. Her high cheekbones were flushed. She looked innocent, which was unusual, at least for Rene. She usually put off a more life-smart demeanor, confident, like she knew exactly how the world worked, and she could kick it in the ass or grab it, whichever she chose.

He said, "You can sit down, you know."

Her eyes focused on him, she took three steps toward the bar, hesitated, and then took another three steps. She set her glass on the counter and walked over to the sofa. She didn't sit. Instead, she shifted her black motorcycle helmet from one hand to the other. The word *Ducati* blazed in red, sharp, modern cursive above the visor.

Rene's eyes floated from the projection screen television to the sliding bookcase panels of movies. The knapsack hanging from her shoulder slipped, and she tugged it back into place, causing her long dark hair to shimmer against the soft yellow light coming from the black and gray speckled lamp behind her.

The entire room was variations of black and gray. Black leather furniture. Black ivory and ceramic statues depicting people posed with outstretched arms. Black and gray art with bits of color, cubist, were affixed to the walls. Light gray Venetian blinds offsetting the black and dark gray swirled carpet designs were drawn, framing the sides of the patio doors. The tile behind, leading from the door across to the bar alcove, gleamed a high-glossy black. The only

exception to the theme was the white ceiling and track lights running along the crease of the gray-paneled walls.

Keith took another drink and speculated how he might loosen her up a bit. Get her to talk. “I see you’ve taken up motorcycling.”

Rene looked at her helmet. “Yeah, a Ducati. I just bought it, so I’m not sure if I like it yet, but, either way, I’m not giving up the Deuce.” Her words were casual enough, but her voice still resonated with formality. She was now looking at the sliding doors leading out to the patio and the city lights spreading across the bottom of the hill.

“I don’t imagine you would.”

She turned to look at him. “Are you still driving the Porsche?”

“Yes.”

Breaking a slight, impish smile, she said, “Well, I suppose I can’t give you a hard time about driving foreign metal now that I’ve gone Italian.”

Keith laughed. “No, you can’t.”

He stepped out from behind the bar and gently placed his hand on the strap of her knapsack. She resisted at first, bringing her hand up to the strap, but then took her hand away and let him have the knapsack along with the helmet. He placed both at the end of the sofa. Her silence seemed deafening, a roar of dead air, to his ears.

Patience, he told himself. Let her get comfortable. Perhaps another drink.

He poured another scotch and returned to stand in front of her, holding it out. She took it. Her eyes wandered down his body, moving to his bare feet and back to the top of his unbuttoned jeans, where they stopped. She chewed at her bottom lip, just a slight nip to the left corner, before she looked at him again.

Keith couldn’t help the smile that creased the corners of his mouth. Her actions, that one long look, told him the sexual attraction was still there. Letting her know he felt the same was easy. He just let his eyes wander down her body in the same manner, appraising, caressing her.

The dark brown, spandex dress fit snug to her soft curves and came mid-way down her thighs. Three shades darker than her skin, yet not quite as dark as her hair, it was sexy, earth-like. Laces trailed from her stomach to above her breasts. The top two laces were undone,

exposing her cleavage. He could see the points of her nipples through the close-fitting fabric. The sight gave him an instant erection.

“Spandex suits you.” His eyes met hers again.

Her cheeks flushed. The effect was dazzling, a shyness he’d never seen in her before, something he wished he could capture with a photographer’s lens and hold forever. His skin prickled. He wanted to pull her to him and kiss her the way they used to. Long, hot, passionate kisses that drove him to the point of pushing her away or taking her. But she looked down. She brought the glass to her lips and drank the J&B in one gulp, the same as she had the first.

“More?” he asked.

“No, thanks.” She handed him the glass, which he returned to the bar before coming back to stand in front of her.

What next? he wondered. Asking about Ohio didn’t seem fitting. Her father was most likely dead, and opening a discussion about death wasn’t something he had in mind, unless she broached the subject.

There was little point in asking if she drove from Montana, or straight from Ohio. It had to be Montana. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have known where to find him. Why hadn’t J.S. called him? He frowned, but quickly brushed it away when he realized Rene might think the frown somehow related to her.

The air conditioning clicked on. Cold air rushed out of the vent above them, putting off a slight dusty smell. Goosebumps rushed across her exposed arms. He wanted to pull her to him and warm her, but he first needed to thaw the air between them. Maybe he could ask her why she came. She obviously came to see him, but perhaps if he handled it right, maybe she would let him inside, forget about how their encounter started.

Keith cleared his throat and used the best Medieval accent he could produce. “S’whut brangs ye t’the land eh LA, m’lady?”

Rene laughed. Not a light, polite laugh, but a full throated laugh. The one he liked. “Why ye, m’lord, wha’ else maught it beh?” she mimicked, her eyes smiling.

Keith returned her laugh. That’s better. Now, for an apology. No lies, though. Their relationship, what was their relationship, anyway? Well, whatever it was, it wasn’t built on dishonesty.

“I’m sorry you walked in on what you did,” he said. “I would say it isn’t a normal state of affairs, but that wouldn’t be—”

“I don’t care.”

Keith felt his eyebrow shoot up. The reaction surprised him because he didn’t want to appear startled, but that’s what her statement did, both startled and amused him. Of course, her direct nature always had that effect on him.

“I mean,” she said. “I don’t care if you have other women.”

“Well, maybe I shouldn’t have asked the ladies to leave so soon then.”

Rene rolled her eyes. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Too bad.” He let an impish smile come to his lips.

Rene laughed, but looked at the floor for a second. “I’ll bet, but what I meant is we aren’t a couple.”

“True enough.” It wasn’t like he hadn’t tried hard enough. He would’ve waited for her, never even gotten involved with Andrea, if she’d given him the least bit of encouragement.

“It’s just that I wasn’t sure I was coming back.”

“But you did.”

“Yes, I did.”

“So. . .” Keith hesitated. Why? he wanted to ask. He didn’t want to scare her off, cause her to shut down the line of communication he just managed to pry open, but he needed to know what she wanted, where things were leading. Her outfit said sex, but maybe things went bad in Ohio, and she just needed a friend. He had, after all, offered to let her come anytime she needed to talk. Discussing some things with J.S., someone so closely associated to her past, might be difficult.

Rene looked at him, as if the same why question weighed on her mind as much as his own. “So?”

“Where do we go from here?”

Rene shifted on her feet. Her eyebrows furrowed. She opened her mouth, but then let it slowly close.

“Is there something you need? Or do you just want to—?” He stopped when she stepped closer, narrowing the space between their bodies to a few inches.

Keith felt her heat flowing to him. His eyes traveled to her lips. Soft, supple, full, waiting to be kissed. She reached out and grabbed the top of his unbuttoned jeans, and he looked down at her hand.

Don't say or do anything, he instructed himself. He knew a full year ago she needed to make the first move. And now, she obviously was, so he needed to relax and just let her do it.

Rene said, "I suppose where we go depends on whether you still want me and whether the ladies finished the job or not."

"Yes and no."

Rene tugged him around so his back was to the sofa. Her body was against him. He wanted to hold her, but resisted.

"Should I take that as a yes, you still want me?" she asked.

"Yes, I still want you and, no, the ladies and I didn't—"

She shoved him onto the sofa. A slight huff escaped him, but excitement overrode it as she settled into his lap and started unlacing her dress. His eyes stayed on her fingers until she jerked his chin up and kissed him. His arms went around her, pulling her mouth against his. Their tongues meshed long, deep.

When their lips parted, he said, "God, how I've missed that."

"What?"

"Those kisses." His hands moved inside her dress to her bare breasts, cupping them, teasing their points. Her body quivered. "I've never found anyone who could excite me so much with just a kiss."

"Just a kiss?"

"Among other things." His mouth covered her nipples—first the right, and then the left. He wanted to take his time, sink into the warmth of her body. She tasted like that same lime and honey mixture he remembered.

Her fingers twined in his hair as he lavished her breasts with attention. When he pulled away, her nipple made a quiet plopping sound as it left his mouth. His hands slid up the inside of her thighs, smooth, hot, tight against him. He started to push the hem of her dress higher, but she slid to the floor, her fingers tugging at his zipper.

"Condom?" Her voice sounded throaty, as if barely able to breathe the word.

Keith fumbled in his back pocket and produced a small black package. She took it and set it on the sofa beside him before she grabbed the backsides of his waistband and yanked. Hard. The force brought his pants to the floor without more than a slight lift on his part, but with a chafe to the outside of his thighs. The pain dissipated the moment her mouth engulfed him.

His hand fell to the top of her head. Her hair felt soft, silky. He forced himself to sit still and let her experience the full extent of him. Part of him wanted to hold her in place, force her into taking him to completion. But the other part wanted to have her, all of her.

He reached down to tug her into his lap. But she pulled away on her own, running her tongue up the soft tufts of hair leading from his groin to his chest, nipping gently at his skin while she worked the condom over him. The feel of her hair falling around her shoulders, tickling his thighs, made him shiver.

Her body found its way back into his lap. She placed her hand on the back of his head and pulled his mouth against hers. Their mouths ground together. Their tongues lapped up the heat they shared.

His hands went to the hem of her dress. He wanted it off, wanted to see her. She yanked it over her head, and it landed on the floor.

Keith took a deep breath. Her body was as beautiful as he remembered—soft, smooth, brown, a deep tan. His hands moved to the space between her thighs, but she pulled them away and pinned them against the smooth leather next to his shoulders. Her mouth crushed his and her tongue forced its way past his lips. The light smell of baby powder drifted from her body. Her tongue felt soft, yet demanding.

Sliding herself onto him, she gave a low moan. Tight, hot. His fists knotted against the leather. Every ounce of strength went into keeping his hands away from her. The fact that she wanted him in her own way excited him even more, if such a thing was possible. Her hands moved across her body, wiping away the light sweat glistening on her skin, before they settled on his shoulders.

It wasn't long before her breath ran short. He opened his mouth, wanting to take in the short, hard pants of her orgasm. His fingers ached to feel the tremble of her body, grab her hips, run slowly up her back. But he forced himself to keep his fists pressed against the sofa as his own orgasm flooded over him. Never had he felt such force, such pleasure.

Smiling, Rene tugged his hands from the couch and wrapped them around her. He pulled her to him, kissing her, chewing at her lips. He never wanted to let go.

Chapter 40

Jake

Jake arrived at Sconelli's ten minutes late and pissed off. It was 3:10 p.m., and he just spent the last two hours talking with Rene's attorney. It was obvious Rene couldn't sidestep prison unless they came up with some hard evidence. Proving Rancey coerced her into returning to Ohio was going to take more proof than it took to prosecute Watergate. Nobody was going to spit out anything against Rancey.

The Bureau wasn't interested in justice. They were too busy covering their collective asses once Rene's attorney made contact with the locals. If the Bureau admitted they had a problem, massive years of convictions could fall into question. Not just those stemming from Rancey's corrupt legwork, but those plotted, tagged and bagged by other agents. One domino. Chink. The whole thing could tumble down to the last dot.

The mob didn't have anything to lose if Rancey wound up buried in pig shit, but the consequences of going after the Bureau were another matter. One failed attempt, and operations could be road-blocked for decades. All deals off. Full enforcement.

The best alternative seemed to be making certain only Rancey toppled while the others remained standing. That, or spin the roulette wheel. Even with a table filled with corrupt bettors, thirty-five to one odds still fell in favor of the house.

Shit. Feeling guilty about someone landing in jail wasn't natural, at least not in his world. He worked in crime, played it like the stock market. People went to jail. It was just a fact. But with Rene, knowing she deliberately walked away from everything ten years ago, and knowing she put herself out to save him, to save them all, made the fact feel different, made him feel culpable.

Well, at least now he understood how Rene felt, thinking she was responsible for the lives of everyone she recruited over the years. It's a wonder she didn't wind up in an asylum, thumbing her bottom lip—bada-badabada-bada-bada.

The sweet, yet tangy smell of fine marinara sauce and garlic puffed out the door when Jake shoved it open. He took a deep breath. His stomach grumbled. He realized he hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon when Irene fixed him a plate of fresh enchiladas. His mind was too

preoccupied. Maybe he could manage to twirl some pasta after the meeting. Not during. Eating was considered bad taste, an insult, while discussing certain business items. And what he intended to discuss rated as one of those items.

People packed the restaurant, prime-cut, illegal fare. Andrea Sconelli, the owner, kept the place dark and well-guarded. The greeter served as an alert system. If any suspected law enforcement made their way to the door, a shout for a clean table signaled the need for important conversation to stop. The dark wood booths looped in half-moons with walls between them. Thick red velvet curtains blocked the daylight and, along with the matching carpet, helped deaden the sound. It was the perfect place for people, especially people who didn't trust one another to meet and discuss things not meant for public consumption.

Jake passed down the wide aisle, nodding to people along the way, with a couple firm handshakes and one condolence over Gar's passing. Gianto Matero sat in the back booth farthest from the restrooms. It was the most secluded spot in the place. Matero's dark gray hair was slicked back. His navy blue suit, matching tie, and white shirt looked like they just rolled off an Italian freighter. His well-dressed state wasn't surprising. Even the casual wear Jake had seen him wear in the past made Nordstrom's clothing resemble Goodwill markdowns.

Jake shook hands with Matero and slid into the booth. The padded black leather felt good against his back—firm, curved against his spine. But he couldn't relax. Not with Matero's sharp chin jutting out at him.

The waiter scurried over and filled Jake's wine glass while Jake offered his apologies.

"Attorneys," Matero said. "Always such time-consuming individuals."

Jake took a small, careful drink of his vino. "Especially Tom Cossack. Have you heard of him?"

"No." Matero stopped to cut and light a cigar—Cuban, judging from the sweet, almost cinnamon, aroma. "Of course, my knowledge of Cleveland attorneys is quite limited."

"He's handled affairs for us before."

Matero gave a slight nod, his dark eyes showing no emotion.

"Right now, he's handling Rene Matio's case."

"I see. A true tragedy, but I suspect she won't have difficulty avoiding a guilty verdict with the appropriate evidence."

Jake pulled out a cigarette and tapped the filter on the pack. "It seems she was wearing a personal wire at the time they arrested her, but the wire disappeared."

Matero frowned and took a long draw from his cigar, letting off a curl of smoke. "That's unfortunate."

"As things stand, she has no proof the agent who arrested her was. . .well, less than honest."

"Aren't they all?"

Jake lit his cigarette and took a hit before needlessly tapping it against a thick glass ashtray. "I once ran into the same agent, myself, while I was in Vegas, doing a little footwork."

Matero sat silent.

Jake understood that by not talking, Matero was purposely leaving the air open for further discussion. "I saw a couple of wolves there. It seems as though Rene ran into the same pair, at least they seemed to be judging from the way she described them."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." Jake ground his cigarette out. "And I have a feeling I know who those wolves were representing, which I don't see as a problem. More of a peace offering than anything. But I can't help but wonder why that party has interest in the welfare of one of our people."

Matero took another draw from his cigar and flagged the waiter. "I'd like to order the Manicotti. And you?"

Jake smiled. In one swipe of the tongue, Matero moved the meeting to the informal level. Eating was only permitted if the stronger party offered, and such an offer was only extended as an act of friendship, or at least acceptance. "I'll have the Penne with tomato sauce."

Matero leaned back in the booth, draping his arm along the back. "Perhaps I should tell you a piece of history."

After several minutes, the food arrived. Both men ate while Matero continued to talk and Jake listened. The story moved through the streets of Chicago, where both Gianto Matero and Phil Matio spent their time as boys and later young men. Part of the story sounded familiar, either something Phil told him during one of his "philosophy of life" talks, or perhaps something Rene mentioned. But the story didn't include Gianto. None of Phil's stories did.

Jake was surprised to learn Phil and Gianto started their futures together. The difference being Phil wanted to stay small, take only enough to live comfortably. Whereas, Gianto wanted an empire.

Their opposing decisions didn't end their friendship, just moved it to a well-protected level. Phil distanced himself from Gianto's legacy. Gianto said he never felt offended since he understood certain things had a way of following people, including activities of close friends.

The two met often over the years. Fishing, hunting, and other sports that allowed them to stay in contact, remain intimate, while employing a certain amount of discretion.

The get-togethers went on until several months before Phil's death, when he fell ill and could no longer travel. Staying in line with Phil's wishes, which had other concerns outside of law enforcement, Gianto didn't make a personal appearance at Phil's home or the funeral.

"The thing to remember," Gianto said, "is I knew about Phil's love for Rene. Phil shared a friendship with Garth Agite. Although my knowledge is such, I also knew Phil was unaware of the extent of Garth's illegal activities. Phil was more interested in maintaining his relationship with Rene, as well as encouraging the life-long bond between Rene and his daughter, Catherine. Phil and I never discussed Rene's father, beyond his disowning of her. Such a terrible thing for a father to do. Daughters are precious, gifts from God."

Jake swiped his garlic bread across the plate, finishing the last of the tomato sauce, before reaching for another cigarette. Gianto moved forward, using the Italian way—calm facial expressions and slight hand gestures along with slow sips of wine—to address, buffer, smooth, and explain events that led up to the original question: why he had such interest in Rene.

"Phil loved Rene as a daughter. Just as much so as if he assisted in her creation."

Jake smiled. His mind ran across Irene and Phil creating a daughter. Scarcely possible, and not what Gianto meant. It wasn't a matter of an affair. It was a matter of choosing one's family rather than accepting blood as the only true bond. Rene and Phil chose one another. The same as he'd chosen Gar, blunder though the choice was. Or perhaps it wasn't. Weighing the overall effect of their bond was difficult.

"When Rene decided to leave Ohio, make a different life for herself," Gianto said, "Phil worried. He knew the FBI or some other even less scrupulous entity, perhaps another family, would approach her. Things like this happen. He considered putting someone on her, but he

didn't because if Rene discovered such a thing, he knew he would lose her love, alienate her forever. Something he didn't want."

That made sense. Rene left, but Jake doubted she ever felt any true animosity toward Phil. Checking in during his illness and showing up at his funeral proved that. Her ongoing contact with Catherine proved it even more.

Over the years, Catherine spoke to him whenever they ran into each other, how Rene was doing. She said she and Rene talked often on the telephone and met on several occasions. But Catherine admitted she never went to Montana, and Rene never came to Ohio, at least not until Phil's funeral.

It was ironic, in a sense. Catherine and Rene paralleling Phil and Gianto the way they handled their ongoing friendship.

Gianto motioned the waiter for another glass of wine and paused for the flourish of the pour and the departure of the server before continuing. "After a few years of listening to Phil talk of his worries concerning Rene, I suggested I might be able to help, put someone in place. A person who could watch Rene, and yet not have any direct association with Phil. Someone who could allow Rene to feel free from her past." Gianto took a small sup of his wine, rolling it around in his mouth. "That's when I asked Virginia to take on a new family name and gain Rene's trust."

Virginia? Jake's mind immediately traveled to their last day together. "Have you ever heard of Gianto Matero?" she'd asked. And then, "We both have our secrets." He assumed Virginia had a gambling debt with Gianto, or maybe she was speaking as a disgruntled employee, or perhaps even a former mistress, although the latter seemed unlikely. Still, he never considered a plant. Somehow, it didn't fit.

Gianto laughed. "By the look on your face, I see you remember my niece."

Niece? That was worse. If Gianto knew—

"And, yes, I know you were dating her. Not to worry. Even if I don't trust you, which I don't, not when it comes to women, I trust her. She's made of strong moral fiber. Something I'm quite sure she inherited from her mother, since my brother is. . . well, as nefarious as myself, even though he cares deeply about his daughter. As I said, daughters are precious, a gift from God."

Jake said, “Virginia and I didn’t. . .well, we didn’t do anything inappropriate.”

“And you won’t,” Gianto said, his eyes firm.

“Understood,” and it was. Any association with Virginia had to be more than a tumble in the sack. Virginia already made that clear. But with Gianto in the picture at such a close level, casual sex, even with Virginia’s consent, was out-of-the-question, if he valued his balls, which he did.

“Okay, now, as for Rene, I had hoped the. . . assistance provided her would resolve the problem, but unfortunately, it didn’t.”

“I think I have an alternate idea, one for which I’m willing to offer you the Windsor casino in exchange, if you’re interested.”

Gianto raised an eyebrow.

“Perhaps you know someone who can eliminate Ran—”

“Stop!” Gianto commanded. Two balding men with side-swipes of gray glanced from the booth across the aisle through hard, annoyed eyes. “This isn’t something to be discussed.” A deep, seemingly disgusted, sigh followed. “Gar moved you up too fast, I’m afraid. Or perhaps you’re too vested in the matter.” Gianto’s forehead furrowed, marking a hard thought. “Have you and Rene. . .? No, never mind. It isn’t important. What’s important here is you should do nothing to jeopardize this situation. Other possibilities exist, and what you were about to suggest could cause grave difficulties that wouldn’t be to anyone’s advantage.”

Jake felt insulted Gianto thought him too young or ill-equipped to handle the situation. But he also realized Gianto was right. Calling for a hit was inappropriate—one of Gar’s orders he, himself, questioned.

“My apologies,” Jake said.

“Accepted.”

“We would, however, be willing to offer the casino in exchange for any assistance you might provide.”

Gianto laughed and shook his head. “You cannot pay for assistance. It would only produce additional trouble. I would be more than glad to purchase the property. From what I hear, you no longer have interest in such an enterprise. But we must take care that the dollar amount reflects the true value.”

“I can arrange that,” Jake said. “You’re correct. Neither Rene nor I have any interest in holding the property. But I’m not sure I understand your concern. Your offer is generous. I’m not questioning its sincerity. I’m just—”

“Let me offer you my thoughts,” and he did, although Jake didn’t feel they offered a solution.

Chapter 41

Rene

Rene's stomach lurched as she watched the armed Bailiff standing at the front of the courtroom. He was tall, boxy, and wearing a uniform with pressed crease marks. His dark eyes stayed focused on her while his fingers toyed with the gun handle strapped to his hip. His straight stance reminded her of a sheriff straight out of an old black-and-white western movie. She wondered if he planned to un-holster and shoot her.

She rubbed her abdomen and looked away. Stress. It's just stress making her feel as though she could heave. Her eyes fell on the grimy windows overlooking the stalagmite buildings sprouting from the gray landscape.

The last time she sat in a courtroom was at J.S.'s trial, and even then, she was an abstract observer, a visitor, not a defendant. The room was small—a fast food lobby finished in wood. The prosecution and defense shared the same table, turned vertical, rather than horizontal. Dull walnut, smelling of lemon oil, hemmed in the jury box, the witness stand, the judicial bench, and the visitor seating. It wasn't exactly what someone might conjure up when thinking of the Northern District of Ohio Federal Court.

Tom Cossack, her attorney, sat beside her. He adjusted his wire-rimmed glasses on his nose, squinting at the papers before him. She glanced at the calendar hanging on the dull, off-white wall behind the jury box. A square white page with red letters and numbers declared the date November 15th with a large 1990 across the top.

Rene rubbed her neck and adjusted her shirt collar. Tom told her to wear a navy blue suit. Her gut told her to wear black cotton pants and a white cotton shirt with her hair in a loose, French twist. Simple. Not too business-like. Just an ordinary woman sucked into something beyond her control. Someone who never set foot inside a courtroom and had no idea how to dress for a jury.

Jake and Wade Fielding, her two potential witnesses, sat outside, in the hallway, where vaulted ornate ceilings offset slick granite floor. Well, that wasn't entirely accurate. Jake and Wade weren't her only witnesses. She managed to pick up a slew. She just didn't know any of them.

Several high-powered attorneys visited Tom right before the trial. Where they came from, or who prompted their involvement she had no idea. But they poured out of the woodwork like termites. Each one telling Tom, “We have a client you need to put on the witness stand.” Each one professing their clients could testify against Rancey, or provide information against other agents who did similar things and slung threats out like fresh mud. In total, she now had seventeen witnesses prepared to testify on her behalf.

Her mother sat behind her. Even without looking back, Rene could see her mother’s fingers twined around an embroidered handkerchief and the worried expression on her face. At first, she didn’t want her mother to come. But now, she felt comforted by her mother’s presence.

She was glad she and her mother were no longer weekly telephone reports, that they actually had a relationship, even if the relationship didn’t re-forge until her father lay on his deathbed, later fashioning her arrest. Leaving Montana was a gamble, half-win, half-lose. But at least she understood her mother.

Breathing in the scent of her mother’s cologne—Chanel No. 5, the same fragrance she’d worn as long as Rene could remember—Rene wondered if her mother saw things. She shook her head. It didn’t matter. Even if her mother didn’t see things in the psychic sense, she still saw them in her heart, and seeing things had it’s price. For her, it meant staying with Buddy, regardless of the cost, regardless of father’s hatred. For her mother, it meant staying with her father. She and her mother wanted to change the future, the destructive acts of the men they loved.

Was it worth it? Did either one of them accomplish anything? Or was it all just wasted time?

Rene glanced at the jury. Her eyes landed on a man with blonde hair, blue eyes, and an impish smile that reminded her of Keith. She wished she were back in Los Angeles, having sex. Doing anything but sitting in a courtroom watching the jurors’ expressions. Their faces were relaxed, too relaxed.

Rancey covered his mouth and coughed from the witness stand. The prosecutor was standing with one arm resting on the corner of the witness box. “So, let me paraphrase what you’ve just told us. You approached Ms. Matio to gain her help in convicting her father, Garth

Agite, and her former lover, Jake Batella. You also wanted information to assist in putting an end to the Agite family business. Is this correct?”

“Yes,” Rancey replied, his face FBI serious.

“You arranged for the early prison release of her friend, James Seitz, in exchange for her cooperation. Is this correct?”

“Yes.”

“Did she provide this cooperation?”

“No, she didn’t. She returned to Ohio and took over her father’s crime business until she felt we were closing in on her.”

Her attorney pushed his palms against the table and came to his feet. “Objection! The witness has stated facts not yet proven and presuming knowledge of the accused’s motives.”

“Sustained,” the Judge ruled. “Strike the last sentence of the witness’s testimony, and the jury should disregard Agent Rancey’s statement regarding an alleged ‘crime business’ and the accused’s motives.”

The Prosecutor paced a moment. “Did Ms. Matio return to Ohio after you came in contact with her?”

“Yes,” Agent Rancey said.

“Did she tell you why she returned to Ohio?”

“Yes, she stated her return was to fulfill the agreement she made to obtain information about the illegal activities occurring in her father’s business and assist the FBI in convicting the parties involved. She also said she wanted to be with her mother during her father’s hospitalization.”

“And what did she do after she returned?”

“According to probate records, she inherited her father’s business holdings with the assets moving into her hands on July 6th.” Rancey stopped and tapped his fingers on his leg. “Through my further discussions with her, she admitted the illegal portion of the business was in her control and still operating, although she agreed to shut it down immediately and cooperate with the FBI to convict her father’s business partners.”

The Prosecutor picked up a stack of papers and handed one stapled set to her attorney and another to the Judge. “If it pleases the court, Your Honor, the prosecution would like to submit Probate records from Garth Agite’s estate to be marked as Exhibit A.”

The Judge glanced through the pages and said, “So allowed,” before handing them to the Bailiff for the jury’s inspection. The first juror fluttered through the pages and passed it to the second.

The Prosecutor continued. “Did she then shut operations down as agreed?”

“When I spoke with her on August 4th,” Rancey said, “she stated the illegal portion of the business was shut down as of July 30th.”

“So,” the Prosecutor said, dragging the word out as though it left a long thoughtful taste on his tongue. “If she closed these operations, why did the FBI continue to pursue charges against her?”

“She didn’t shut the illegal portion of the business down immediately. She continued to operate it, as sole CEO for the Agite Corporation, for nearly a month. She also verbally refused to turn over the business records or provide us with any information concerning the people involved.” Rancey hesitated. “The people she stated were involved in criminal activities both on her and her father’s behalf.”

“I see.” The Prosecutor took several steps to position himself in front of the jury box again. Rancey’s eyes followed. “Is that when you arrested her?” the Prosecutor said.

“Yes. We arrested her on August 4th.”

“And do you have any knowledge of what occurred following her arrest?”

Rancey gave a curt nod. “Yes, within the weeks following her arrest, she dissolved the Agite Corporation, and property records indicate she signed over the majority of tangible assets she inherited to fifteen individuals. The balance of assets were sold and, according to the corporation’s bank records, the money, along with other money held in the corporate bank account, was distributed to one hundred and fifty-two other individuals. These additional individuals did not comprise the entire employee base working under the now dissolved Agite Corporation. IRS records show the corporation’s employee withholding were somewhere in the neighborhood of three thousand.” Rancey stopped and took a breath. “The Unity Studio stock was the sole asset Ms. Matio retained, other than the approximate twelve million in cash

from a combination of the corporation monies earned through its controlling interest in Unity, as well as insurance policies payable to her.”

Rene’s eyes met the cold, blue eyes of the Prosecutor as he picked up another stack of papers, and with the same procedure as the last, entered Exhibits B, C, D and E. So far, nothing Rancey said proved anything beyond normal business transfers. She couldn’t deny she discussed the closeout of the business with Rancey, although she never gave him the exact date and never once admitted to having any knowledge of criminal activities.

The Prosecutor returned to his spot in front of the jury. “Okay, Agent Rancey, what makes you believe these holdings resulted from anything criminal?”

“Several things,” Rancey replied. “First, a number of her businesses, primarily antique shops, but others as well, delivered countless stolen items to local police stations. The employees, her employees through the corporation, instructed the police to contact her directly if they had any questions.”

The Prosecutor swooped to the table and delivered a thick stack of police reports to the Judge for admission as Exhibit F. Rene figured the information ran both for and against her. The jury could consider it an act of honesty or good faith. But they could easily consider it knowledge of previous illegal acts.

“Anything else?” the Prosecutor prompted.

“Yes, the criminal records of the corporate employees she chose to distribute funds to.”

Tom stood. “Objection! Relevance, Your Honor. Any business dealings Ms. Matio may have had with these individuals doesn’t make her responsible for the acts these individuals may have committed.”

The Prosecutor responded with, “We are attempting to provide a basis of ongoing criminal activities directly connected to the products and services provided by Ms. Matio’s business enterprises.”

“I’ll allow it,” the Judge said. “But get to the point, Counselor.”

“Thank you, Your Honor,” the Prosecutor replied.

Tom sat down with a wrinkled, sour look on his face. The Prosecutor rambled forward, showing the criminal records of five men, with Rancey outlining how each conviction correlated to the position they held within the corporation. John Gantz, an operation’s manager

at the Big Nugget: extortion. The same with Fred Olinger, another operation's manager, working for the Verenza, the corporation's largest casino, now owned by Wade. Solicitation by Ted Durenz, the manager of the massage parlor in Cincinnati. And two breaking and entering convictions, one by a warehouse manager and another by one of the trucking supervisors. All arrested, charged, and convicted during the time the corporation still owned and operated the businesses in question.

The information didn't surprise her. Not that she knew the specifics of the arrests and subsequent convictions. But she knew most of the men high up enough to rate a portion of the business profits had a criminal record.

The Prosecutor dragged out more guilty verdicts, all rendered before her takeover. Her attorney objected, but the Judge ruled in the Prosecution's favor. The point? She, or the corporate records, most likely had information regarding how these crimes connected to others, both inside and outside of the business. Her refusal to turn over the records and assist law enforcement amounted to obstruction of justice.

The Prosecutor and Rancey ricocheted questions and answers, naming each felon and the specific business component of the felon's employment. In doing so, they built a business portfolio that would've impressed even the most suave Forbes list candidate, let alone an average twenty-five thousand dollar a year juror working a blue, pink or white-collar job.

Rene focused her attention on the jury. She didn't know any of them by name, only their juror number. They were all listening to Rancey, their faces calm. Some glanced at her, but turned away when they discovered her watching them. Juror number seven didn't, though. His brown eyes locked and held.

Rene blinked. Images slammed through her head, flashing out like someone fanned a set of photographs before her. Juror number seven ran his fingers through his thick, choppy brown hair and smiled. Not a pleasant smile. More like a "so what if you know" grin to let her understand he knew.

How people, murderers, could tell she saw, in her head, the crimes they committed, she wasn't sure. Maybe it was the expression on her face. Maybe it was the twisted nature of their minds, the probing, or the connection. But whatever it was, juror number seven knew.

Ironic, Rene thought. Pathetic, disgusting and ironic all rolled into one neat, pudgy little package. Number seven looked ordinary enough. White shirt. Blue tie. Like an accountant, or an IRS pencil grinder.

Her eyes moved to the judge. A thin frown formed on his lips while he studied her, and his eyebrows furrowed as she stared back at him. Nothing. Nada. No murders, although she was sure he passed death sentences. Didn't most judges, at least at his level? In fact, she was almost certain she read no more than a month ago where Judge Rufus Henderson, the man in question, ordered the electrocution of the Cuyahoga River serial murderer.

The smell of sweat—hers, her attorney's, and the Assistant Prosecutor's—stung at her nose. She looked away from the judge and tried to focus on the Prosecutor's questions and Rancey's answers. But she couldn't. Her gaze wandered back to juror seven, whose eyes were still upon her.

Another smile spread across his fat lips. Her stomach lurched. She wanted to tell someone, but what would be the point? She couldn't even get people to believe Rancey set her up, coerced her. How could she convince anyone about, or even explain, the accuracy of the mental images flashing through her head? About how juror number seven anally assaulted and strangled a woman and dumped her body in Lake Erie? Method: duct tape to secure, thin wire to strangle, black plastic to wrap, light blue Ford Escort to transport, and medium-sized fishing rig to dump. Victim: blonde, twenties, thin—boyish in appearance.

Bile surged to her throat. Rene swallowed and forced herself from shaking her head in disgust. Both the jury and the judge might read the reaction as something different, perhaps even think she felt remorse or guilt over Rancey's testimony.

Sick. The whole thing was sick. Number seven would vote her guilty. No point in freeing her. If she was behind bars, no one would believe much, if anything, she had to say. Fruitcake. Wacky. Looney toons. Heck, they probably wouldn't even believe her if she walked out of the courtroom today a free woman. No mob, no past, just a regular person who, for some dumb reason, got pictures shoved into her head whenever she came in contact with a murderer.

The Prosecutor finished and took a seat across from her. Tom stood up and stepped to the middle of the courtroom, scratching his head and folding his arms across his chest. "If things were as you say they were, which I'm having difficulty believing—"

“Objection!” The prosecutor was on his feet. “The defense counsel’s opinion isn’t at issue here.”

“Sustained,” the judge ruled in a stern voice, his dark eyes still scrutinizing her, holding her in a snare. “Limit yourself to questions, Counselor.”

“Yes, your honor,” Tom said. “Why didn’t you arrest Garth Agite based on the evidence presented against Ms. Matio?”

A brief silence followed before Rancey answered. “I’m not sure I understand the question.”

“You say the evidence you’re presenting today is enough to prove Ms. Matio guilty of racketeering. That you’ve collected this evidence against what you describe as the Agite crime family over a period of years, decades in fact. Yet, you say you needed Ms. Matio’s assistance to convict her father. Is this correct?”

“Yes.”

“Well then, I can’t help but wonder why you didn’t simply use the evidence to convict Garth Agite without Ms. Matio’s assistance.”

“We couldn’t provide a direct link between Garth Agite and the criminal portion of his business dealings. We knew illegal activities occurred. As I’ve already testified, we aided in the arrest of a number of people involved in extortion, prostitution, theft, fraud, and so forth. But those were minor, local matters, for the most part.” Rancey’s eyes moved to the jury. “We still lacked the necessary proof to connect Garth Agite with the overall interstate activities, unlawful activities. To prove a racketeering charge, we needed information that would show he specifically ordered these acts, either directly or indirectly.”

“You had to prove he was the one in charge, the one running the show, more-or-less.”

“Yes.”

“Yet you say you now have this proof against Ms. Matio?”

“Yes, through two insiders.” Rancey stopped, as though he thought of leaving the answer at that, but then added, “Frank Getz and Donnie Bennett.”

“Both of whom you state worked for Garth Agite at a high level for years and apparently committed the very acts you’re trying to prosecute. Is this true?”

“Yes, but—”

“Yet you didn’t prosecute them?” Tom arched an eyebrow and glanced at the jury. “Why is that, Agent Rancey?”

“Because we didn’t have any solid evidence against them, and at the time they stepped forward, they were no longer involved in criminal activities. They voluntarily agreed to testify against Rene Matio.”

Tom stepped closer to the witness box. One arm still folded across his chest, he placed a finger beneath his chin. “Why do you suppose, after four or five years of working under Garth Agite, they gained a sudden attack of conscience?”

The prosecutor jumped up again. “Objection! Calls for speculation on the part of the witness.”

Tom dipped his head and waved his hand in a conceding, outward flourish. “Let me rephrase the question. What were the reasons both men gave as to why they wanted to voluntarily testify against Ms. Matio?”

Rancey hesitated. Not much, but enough to cause several jury member faces to contort. “None that I’m aware of.”

“Did they cut a deal to avoid prosecution?”

“They were granted immunity, which is a fairly normal—”

“Granted immunity?” Tom pulled his glasses down to the tip of his nose and stared first at the jury, and then Rancey, before shoving them back into place. “From past acts?”

Rancey folded his hands in his lap. “Yes.”

“Were they granted immunity from anything else?”

“Nothing that I’m aware of.”

Tom paced a few steps back to the table and picked up his bright yellow legal pad. “Nothing that you’re aware of?”

“That’s correct.”

“You didn’t. . .let’s say offer them immunity from future acts, did you?”

“That’s not normal procedure in exchange for testimony.” Rancey crossed his legs and settled back into the leather seat, making himself comfortable, not an ounce of stress showing.

“I didn’t ask if it was normal procedure. I asked if you did it.”

“No.”

“So, if I may, let me summarize what you’ve just told us, Agent Rancey. You say these two men, who you know to be part of the former Agite crime family came to you. They did come to you, didn’t they?”

“No, I went to them.”

“Ah. . .” Tom rubbed his forehead. “You went to them. Was there a reason for that?”

“I wanted them to provide me with evidence of Rene Matio’s criminal leadership.”

“But why them? Out of the . . . how many did you say? Fifteen top men remaining?” Tom rifled through a few pages of the legal pad. “Yes, here it is, you said fifteen. So why these two?”

“They were younger than the rest, which led me to believe they might have less allegiance to Ms. Matio.”

“But I thought you testified that Ms. Matio wasn’t involved in any criminal activities for the previous ten years. That her lack of involvement was one of the reasons you approached her. You considered her reformed.”

“Yes, but a large portion of the men had been with either Garth Agite or Phil Matio for longer than ten years. There was a chance they had stronger sentiments about Ms. Matio, either through their direct association with her in the past, or through their knowledge of her relationship with the two men they worked under.”

“I see, so this didn’t have anything to do with the fact that you felt they were young enough to set up new operations, allowing you to solicit their testimony in exchange for your agreement not to extort monies from them?”

The prosecutor jumped from his seat, knocking his briefcase to the floor in a sputter of paper and leather. “OBJECTION!”

Regardless to what was said, which Rene knew to be nothing more than one lie offsetting another, all pouring from Rancey’s lips, the reason Frankie and Donnie agreed to testify—no, not testify—the reason they agreed to lie was twofold. She turned off the spigot, and the money stopped, or at least narrowed to a few fat drops of tap water compared to the crates of Dom Perignon they were accustomed to. Giving them a share of the business holdings didn’t matter. Those shares still produced less. Setting up another operation, even if they approached it jointly, would take ten or fifteen years before it rose to the level of her father’s. That’s saying

either one of them had the know-how to accomplish such a thing, which she had her doubts. But if they were to set up a new shop, they couldn't afford Rancey's "no FBI" fee, and their testimony erased the obligation.

A dozen questions and three objections later, Tom came to the question Rene wanted to hear. "Was Ms. Matio wearing a cassette recorder at the time of her arrest?"

"No." Rancey's lips didn't even twitch.

"Your partners, the ones who actually handled the arrest, didn't remove a recorder taped to her stomach?"

"No."

Rene sighed. Tom turned and gave her a silent, disapproving look before he faced the jury and said, "Did Ms. Matio resist arrest?"

Rancey hesitated. "A little."

"Were there any witnesses in the diner?"

"There were people in the diner."

Tom walked over to the table and ran his finger down a page, flipped to another and repeated the process. "Who from the diner is here to testify?"

"No one that I know of."

Rene already knew no one at the diner saw, or wanted to admit it. Which applied most likely depended on who they thought carried more weight: the mob or the FBI. The waitress and the cook, along with a few unnamed patrons, probably figured screwing with either didn't sound like a good idea. Their best shot at making sure they had a breath to take the day after would be to forget they saw anything out of the ordinary, even if it meant letting the truth slip by in the process.

Rene couldn't blame them. Not really. She would've done the same. Sometimes not knowing is better than knowing, or at least admitting there was any difference between the two entities—illegal and legal, or more accurately put, opposing illegalities.

Tom looked up from the papers and stepped to the center of the courtroom. "Did you, or one of the other arresting agents, secure a list of witnesses at the diner who might have been able to testify as to what they overheard or about this resistance you state Ms. Matio demonstrated?"

Rancey blinked. “No, I didn’t think—”

“Did the arresting agents overhear the conversation, or did they perhaps tape record it from outside?”

“No, they weren’t in the diner, and we didn’t feel a bug necessary.”

Tom’s eyes widened, and he made a “what?” gesture with his hands. “Did you record any of these alleged conversations with Ms. Matio?”

Even if he had, Rene knew he wouldn’t admit it. Any tape recordings Rancey had wouldn’t be to his advantage.

Rancey shifted in his seat. “No.”

“Is that normal FBI procedure?”

“The decision to tape record conversations is up to the investigating agent, and I chose not to because I felt Ms. Matio would trust me less if she discovered her conversations were being recorded.”

“But how would she know? How would she find out?”

“It happens.” Rancey shrugged. “And when it does, it often risks the investigation, as well as the safety of the investigating agent.”

“So, in essence, you’re saying you have no proof, other than your word, that any of these admissions on Ms. Matio’s part are true?”

“You have my word as an investigator, with a spotless record, working for the federal government.”

Tom stood there a moment, his arms folded across his chest, his eyes narrowed, before he said, “I have no further questions of the witness at this time, Your Honor, although I would like to reserve the right to recall.”

The Judge turned toward Rancey. “You may step down, Agent Rancey, but you are instructed to remain in the courthouse until the conclusion of these proceedings.”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Rancey left the courtroom without as much as a bead of sweat on his forehead. Rene watched as he walked past and stared at her with smiling blue eyes. Too bad the jurors didn’t know him, didn’t know what he was capable of doing. Denying he and his pals pulled a tape

recorder off her at the time they arrested her didn't even cost him more than the breath he used to utter the words.

The Prosecutor rose and called Frankie to the stand. She wondered if he and Donnie drew straws for the honor. Or in this case, the dishonor, since she was quite certain Jake and Wade were throwing visual darts of hatred at both of them in the hallway.

If she knew Jake, which she thought she did, he undoubtedly had a few people plotting something distasteful. Even if the Agite operations were over, and no one in Mafia-land really cared one way or another about her, rolling on someone had a price.

The funny thing was, Rene knew Rancey had a point, a small one, but a point, and a legal one at that. She did run an illegal operation, if only for a brief time. Three, maybe four, weeks but a definite space between the time she inherited her father's business and the time she closed out the illegal portion. Was there a better way to handle things? Probably. Could she have refused the inheritance? Perhaps. But what would've happened to the business? Who would've gained control? Anyone? She should've asked, but she just couldn't see turning everyone into the Bureau. Wasn't the whole purpose to put an end to things? No, not really. Rancey was just as guilty as everyone else. He didn't want things to stop. He just wanted a share.

True law enforcement didn't exist as far as she could tell. If it did, perhaps she would've turned the whole mess over to them, and let them sort it out. But in her life, within the boundaries of her past, and what Rancey later showed her as the present, the lines blurred to the point of nonexistence.

Rene glanced at the jury box. Juror number seven turned to look at her again. More images flooded her head. She closed her eyes for a moment. Was racketeering worse than murder?

She concentrated on the witness stand and Frankie. His light blue polo shirt looked cheap compared to his usual Armani. His chin flitted back and forth between the Prosecutor and her. "Rene called a meeting of all the men. She told us to fold up shop because the Bureau had the goods on us, and if we didn't, we'd find ourselves in custody in less than a week."

"And the property?" the Prosecutor asked.

“She split it up by seniority. She said as long as we were willing to keep our mouths shut, we could have a piece of the pie. If we didn’t, we were out the door with nothing, not a single dime, and our names on a hit list somewhere.”

“What did she say about the money?”

“She said she was keeping it, although I think some of it went to her mother. The only money she passed out came from the sale of any property left following the split. What didn’t get passed out to the remaining fifteen of the initial thirty-two bosses got passed out to those men still working beneath us.”

“What about Jake Batella?”

Rene cut off the breath she’d started to suck in. She didn’t want Jake to wind up on trial, too, but she also knew she couldn’t show any emotion. If she showed the slightest emotion, the twelve people deciding her fate would read it as fear. And fear—like hostility and reluctance, what she first felt the day Rancey walked through her office door a year and a half ago—would be read as guilt somewhere down the line. Or maybe it didn’t matter. Maybe all of it read guilt from the day she was born.

Chapter 42

J.S.

J.S. was on edge, a straight razor, not even a safety blade. Interstate-271 was jammed. The cars jerked forward a foot at a time, like a pack of slow moving, blue-haired old ladies in a grocery store on senior discount day. The vinyl seat felt sticky. Move it! A trip downtown from the airport used to take a half-hour, maybe less, but he hadn't lived in Cleveland for ten, no, eleven and a half years, and he wasn't sure if his memory about who lived where and how to get there still applied.

The car in front stalled. The driver jumped out and popped the hood. "Shit!" J.S. shouted. If they didn't get moving, he wasn't going to make it in time. He might already be too late.

The cab driver's eyes darted to him in the rearview mirror, brown, a shade darker than his light milk chocolate face, but wide with a hint of fear.

"Sorry, I didn't mean nothing by it," J.S. said. "It's just I gotta skit. It's important. Real important. You think this thing can move faster? It might be worth. . ." He threw his hand up. "Say a hundred above the meter."

The driver's eyebrow shot up. "We see what we can do." His voice carried a heavy Middle-eastern accent. The taxi jolted forward. The driver took the emergency strip along the freeway and headed for the exit.

J.S. leaned back and watched the traffic fall below them as they sped over the bypass. Cleveland was a jumbled bunch of folks. Always was. Taking a cab instead of renting a compact was smart. It gave him a driver who knew where he was going and more legroom. Not that he couldn't afford to rent a full-sized car if he wanted. He had plenty of money, and none of it went for much of anything—some clothes and personals, but nothing worth mentioning. Keith gave him almost everything he needed—a place to live, a car to drive, and his meals. Life was good with thick brown gravy on it.

He shouldn't have taken off from Montana so fast, though. Keith sent him to take care of the ranch. Rounding up the cattle put more hands in the ranch house, and more work in the barns. He should've at least dropped Keith a "bye buddy, be back shortly" note.

But once the plain brown envelope the man promised him landed the mailbox, the only thing on his mind was how fast his feet could hit Ohio. He jumped into the Bronco, headed for Missoula, and grabbed the first flight out. No clothes, no telephone calls, no nothing.

J.S. shrugged. Keith probably wouldn't even know. His head was wrapped up in his movie twelve hours a day, six days a week for the last three and a half months. It didn't leave much, if any, time to think about anything, other than getting to work and back again. Well, that, and choking down a meal now and then.

Besides, what Rene told him—no, what she got her pointy little finger right up in his face and ordered him—not to do before she went back to Ohio still rang in his head.

“No, don't tell Keith my trial date. And I mean it!” Her finger had come within an inch of the tip of his nose. “Not the date. Not the trial. Not the sentencing. None of it. Do you understand?”

“I'm not going to lie.” J.S. couldn't, not to a friend, especially a friend like Keith who took him in when nobody else was even willing to give him a howdy-do.

“Okay, you're right.” Rene's face softened. “You shouldn't lie if he asks, but otherwise, don't tell him, okay? He doesn't need his name splattered across the front page with mine. You know that.”

Like Keith wasn't already on the front page every other day. Not the newspapers. More like tabloids and movie magazines. Well, and it didn't involve the mob or racketeering or anything illegal.

Okay, so she had a point. Keith didn't need that kind of press. But still, the stupid-ass white boy could've asked. Something like, “Hey, what's up with Rene?” Keith would've said it more polite, more formal, but at least then he'd know. He could ask a few questions, figure things out for himself. Or shit, he could pick up a newspaper and read about it, if he actually thought about anything outside of Hollywood.

As far as J.S. could tell, Rene and Keith spent a couple days together. Mrs. Bumbe didn't tell him the particulars. But judging from the time Mrs. Bumbe said Rene first showed up at Keith's house, and the day she made her way back to Montana to say goodbye before she headed off for Ohio, and the time he figured it took to ride from L.A. to Montana on a motorcycle, it still left her a couple days. Enough time to screw white boy's brains out,

something he was pretty sure she did, especially considering the advice he planted in her pea-brain.

Dumb ass brown girl. She didn't have enough sense to know Keith even wanted her. It was clear as clean glass, but she thought it wasn't anything more than a lay.

J.S. unsnapped his parka. No point in fussing over whether Rene figured things out or not. She and Keith were both acting teenage silly, and they'd either work it out, or they wouldn't. He couldn't do much about what either one of them did. All he could do was get to the courthouse and give Rene a shot at getting out of the shit he got her into. She should've left him in prison. He wasn't doing all that bad.

The driver took a sharp right. The taxi whizzed forward, dipping in and out of traffic until it jarred to a stop in front of the federal courthouse. The driver turned around and grinned. "We here. Fast, too."

J.S. shoved two fifties and a twenty into the driver's hand. His feet hit the sidewalk, slapping their way up the squat cement steps, through the revolving door before he stopped. Which way? There was an elevator to the left and a wide marble staircase winding upward from the middle. The floors stacked above him like a fancy wedding cake trimmed in brass icing. Two people peered at him from over the railing three tiers up. There was a black marquee next to the elevator.

J.S. headed for the marquee, letting his fingers run down the list of raised white letters. Which one? There were more than a dozen offices with names and numbers.

Six courtrooms. How was he supposed to figure them out? Wait a minute. Some were marked civil and others criminal. The criminal ones had four hundred numbers. Fourth floor.

J.S. gave the elevator button a solid press. Nothing. The needle stayed on six. He pressed again. Nothing. It didn't budge.

He didn't have time to screw around, so he headed for the staircase, his feet moving in fast rhythm and his fists pumping at his sides. He felt his breath jabbing at his chest. By the time he reached the fourth floor, his head hung and his hands fell to his knees.

Pull it together, he told himself. A hand touched his shoulder, and he jumped.

"Take it easy." Jake Batella stood beside him, his hair ruffled, his suit wrinkled, like he just woke up.

“You scared the shit out of me,” J.S. said.

“Sorry.” Jake shrugged in apology. “It’s been a rough day. Things aren’t going all that great. We thought we could offset Rancey’s testimony, but I’m not sure how it’s working out. Why are you here? I thought you weren’t supposed to come back to Ohio.”

“Can’t explain.” J.S.’s breath was still knifing at his lungs, burning with every word he said, or thought about saying. “Don’t have time. Is the trial still on?”

“Yes.”

“Where?” J.S. pulled himself upright.

Jake pointed down the hallway to a set of double oak doors. J.S. took off, while Jake’s voice trailed behind him. “Hey, you better not go in there, or you’ll wind up pissing off the Judge.”

Bam! The doorknobs struck the wall. Everyone turned to look. The Judge scowled.

Rene had a “What the . . .?” look on her face. Irene’s eyes were wide. J.S. didn’t care what the other people looked like. “Sorry, Your Honor,” he mumbled.

“Sit down and be quiet or leave,” the Judge ordered.

Closing the door, J.S. slinked up the aisle and slid in beside Irene. Rene turned around, and the attorney standing in front of the witness stand started to talk again.

Irene leaned over and whispered, “What are you doing here?”

J.S. pointed to the manila envelope. His eyes darted around the courtroom. He needed to figure out which one was Rene’s attorney. Everybody was sitting so close together. A few jurors were still staring at him with their faces squeezed. A lady with floppy red hair and a pink shirt rolled her eyes and clicked her tongue loud before she turned to concentrate on the witness.

J.S. shifted in his seat. The man in the witness box was saying, “. . .told me that he needed my help to convict Henri Gutz, my boss. I mean, my former boss.”

“What type of business was your former boss involved in?” The attorney stood loose, casual, with his arms hanging at his sides.

The witness rubbed his nose and ran his fingers through his thin brown hair. He looked like a ferret. “I guess you could say he was mob.”

“Tell us what you mean by ‘mob’.”

“Mob is mob. I don’t know how to explain it other than saying most of the money came from prostitution, protection, gambling, drugs, illegal stuff. Although he also owned some shops, a couple casinos. . .oh, and some small manufacturing joints.”

“Okay, so what did Agent Rancey say he wanted you to do?”

“At first, he said he wanted me to get involved again. You know, get back in good with Henri and get some information. But I told him I wasn’t interested in dying early. And I wasn’t involved in any of it any more, didn’t want to be, either.”

“By ‘any of it,’ do you mean illegal activities?”

“Yeah. I worked collection for Henri before I got sent up.”

“Can you explain what it means when you say you ‘worked collection’?”

“Sure.” The guy shrugged and brushed at the side of his face. “If somebody owed Henri, I went out to find the person and see if I could get the money. I’d try it nice like. But if they didn’t pay, then I got a little rough with them. You know, beat them up a little, blow away their fish tank, or something else to put a good scare in them. How much more I did, what I had to do to them, depended on the person.”

“I see. What did Agent Rancey say when you told him you weren’t interested in getting involved with that any more?”

“He said if I didn’t, he would make sure my boy. . . I have a twenty-three year old son. He’d just turned twenty-one then. But Agent Rancey told me that my boy would wind up in prison or worse, if I didn’t—”

One of the attorneys sitting across from Rene jumped up. “Objection! I fail to see the relevance of this testimony. Agent Rancey isn’t on trial here.”

The man asking the questions, who J.S. figured to be Rene’s attorney said, “Your Honor, Agent Rancey’s testimony is the prime evidence against my client, and as such, allows me to present information about his credibility, as well as his past activities and possible motives for being less than forthright about his involvement with my client.”

J.S. glanced around. Agent Rancey wasn’t anywhere in sight. The Judge probably made him sit outside, or in another room.

Good. The Judge needed to hear about Rancey and everything he did. Rancey was a crook. Anybody with as much as a piss-ant of a brain could figure that out.

The prosecutor and Rene's attorney were still arguing. The Judge had his face scrunched up. The jurors looked confused, their eyes blinking and darting back and forth between the lawyers.

Time to deliver the envelope. J.S. slid from his seat in a slight crouch and leaned over the wooden banister. He tapped Rene on the shoulder. She looked at him with startled gray eyes as he handed her the envelope. She started to say something, but he shooed her back around with his hand and returned to his seat.

"What's in the envelope?" Irene asked.

J.S. didn't answer. He watched while Rene first opened the note he attached to the front. Her eyes ran across it before moving to him. A slow smile came to the corner of her mouth. She mouthed the words, "Thank you," before turning around and coughing. Hard. Several times. Her attorney looked back, and she motioned him over. The judge gave her a cross look. The prosecutor folded his arms across his chest and tapped his foot.

Screw the Judge, J.S. thought. Whether he knows what's up or not, he needs to know.

Rene whispered into her attorney's ear several seconds. His eyes traveled from the envelope to Rene to J.S. before he stood up and turned to the judge. "Your honor," he said. "It's just come to my attention that we now have tape recorded evidence, which may allow us to dispense with this witness's testimony."

"I object," the prosecutor said. "I wasn't provided a copy of this evidence and have no way of knowing if—"

The Judge said, "In my chambers, Counselors, and bring your client with you, Mr. Cossack. We'll reconvene in twenty minutes."

Irene grabbed his arm. J.S. smiled and let Irene drag him from his seat as Rene stood, her eyes searching him. He said, "Go."

Chapter 43

Rene

Rene worked through her laundry, separating whites and colors. The swish-swash of the washers reminded her of sitting on a beach, digging her toes into the warm brown sand along the shores of Lake Erie, cottonwood floating in the air. If only the concrete surrounding her wasn't so suffocating.

She placed the two piles of clothes in separate washers. A quick twist of the dial, and she sat down in a hard orange chair. She rested her head against the wall behind her. The molded plastic sucked at her back through the orange cotton jumpsuit. She was sick of orange. Orange jumpsuits. Orange chairs. Orange counters. Orange signs.

The only other colors were gray and green. Concrete floors and metal bordered by grass green walls. When everyone, or at least the inmates, sat in the cafeteria or recreation room, they looked like oblong pumpkins in the middle of a vine patch on a dreary gray day, even if it was February.

Three months in prison, and the one thing she knew for certain was time. She did mundane things like sweeping, mopping, and serving food, but time was always in the forefront.

If she wasn't thinking about her past, flashes poured through her head from the women around her. She saw so many vile things—rape, murder, mutilation, incest, a constant jumble of foul acts. Not all were what the women did. Some were snippets of what other people did to them, what caused them to be the way they were.

At times, she went back to her cell and buried her head beneath a pillow just to smother out the images parading through her mind, one after another, relentless, pushing at the edge of her sanity. Other times, she slowed the pictures down, flipped them over in her head, considered how she could control them, watch them grow, change, expand, swell like a balloon filled with fat drops of water—drip, drip, drip.

Before she could only see what people did. Never things other people did to them, and never without looking into the eyes of the person who committed the acts. She also didn't have control over the images. Now, she could freeze frame them, pick them apart, or spin them over

in her mind. But no matter how many times she did, or how hard she examined the motionless pictures, she couldn't see the point.

She tried talking with the women, making friends with them, listening to them talk about their lives, and letting their anguish flood over her. She thought maybe she could work like an ointment and heal their sorrow. But she couldn't. Their pain continued no matter what.

Rene let a huff escape her. The only good thing she could find about her ability to see such things was it made her own pain seem light in comparison. Yes, she hated her father. There was no way around the way she felt about him. Anything she considered remotely likeable about him—the way he used to toss her in the air when she was four, the way he positioned the candles on her thirteenth birthday cake, the way he held her hand before she walked down the aisle for her first communion—was gone. If not from the second he threw her out, and she moved in with Phil. Then later, when she looked in his eyes, while he was laying on his deathbed, gasping for breath, and images of how he killed Buddy slammed through her head, she hated him even more. He did it, and worse, he was proud of the way he tainted her life in the process, even to the point of pitting the next man she loved against her.

At least that didn't work. Jake couldn't kill her. He couldn't even harm her. He somehow managed to retain a thread of decency that prevented him from becoming her father.

But she still couldn't help feeling guilty knowing her involvement with Buddy caused his death. It wasn't within her control. Not really. Buddy was the one who pushed their relationship. She didn't even like him in the beginning, and she never pursued him. He pursued her. And after they got together, she gave him his best shot at survival when she walked away from him. He just didn't take it.

Knowing he didn't off himself helped. Not much, but a little. He didn't deliberately wrap his car around a telephone pole. He didn't rage down the road, out-of-control, in a fit of depression she could've prevented, stopped, buffered.

No, Buddy's death was no one's fault but her father's, and the most she could do afterwards, so many years later, when she discovered the truth, was to settle the score, something she did by refusing to let her father drag her down with him. She knew he wanted her to pull the plug on his life, commit murder, balance things out. But she didn't. She made him die his own slow, painful death.

Phil, though, her other father, the way she felt about him was even more complex. He saturated her life. He was part of her future from the day she was born. She remembered him showing her how to thread a night crawler on a fishing hook at six. How he taught her to play pool at ten, positioning her hands gently, guiding her to calculate the diamonds to make the best shot. She remembered so many good things about him, but she also remembered he was the one who introduced her to crime.

She knew Phil didn't consider what he did wrong. But regardless as to what he thought, it was wrong. She was wrong to follow him. She was wrong to drag Buddy into it, to drag J.S. into it, and even later, to drag Jake into it. She couldn't count the number of people she dragged into crime. She regretted every bit of it, and considered prison her atonement.

She couldn't count the number of times over the last three months she played the trial out in her head. The jury spent six hours deliberating.

At first, she couldn't understand why they found her guilty. The evidence was there. The tapes clearly showed how Rancey coerced her. The act of perjury erased his testimony, at least in the paper sense. The judge struck it from the record and filed charges against him. But nothing could strike the words from the minds of the twelve ordinary people sitting on the jury.

She had to admit, a guilty verdict for racketeering was justifiable. She ran an illegal business, if only for a brief time. That much was a proven, documented in Probate Court, fact. The property and monetary conveyance wasn't illegal, but everything that came with it was, and she didn't deny the illegality behind it.

But the jury apparently felt closing out the illegal activities absolved her of racketeering. They couldn't just let her walk away, though, not without finding her guilty of something. Letting her off without a slap would mean the system failed. Rancey's criminal activities intermingled with everything. But her culpability still stuck out at them like an insolent child's tongue, and they had to do something about it. Finding her guilty of obstruction seemed fitting, at least to them. A lesser charge. One justified by her refusal to assist law enforcement in convicting Jake, Wade, even Donnie and Frankie, everyone involved in her father's business. Even if the law enforcement in her immediate reach was corrupt, it wasn't all corrupt, was it?

Not in the eyes of the jury. It couldn't be. If it was, everything the jurors believed in, counted on, trusted in would crumble.

Her attorney said she could appeal, get the verdict overturned. She stood in the center of the courtroom, listening to the sound of the jurors' feet slide across the slick wooden floors on their way out—their job done—and the clicking sound of handcuffs being placed on her hands and lashed to her feet while her attorney talked about filing appeal papers and petitioning for another bail release. Her mouth opened. She could still feel the words, taste them in her mouth, sticky, not wanting to come out. “No. Don’t.”

Her attorney argued with her, his mouth rigid and his words clipped. The bailiff looked at her with wide, surprised brown eyes. She didn’t care. The Judge sentenced her to six months, and he was right. She might not be guilty of racketeering. Maybe not even obstruction. She probably wasn’t guilty of any particular one thing she could point out. But she was guilty of everything she did over the years, before she left Ohio, before she left crime. Deciding not to appeal was right. She just didn’t know she was pregnant when she made the decision.

But she wondered, would knowing have made a difference? Probably not. No, she needed to cleanse herself.

The first month she missed her cycle, she chalked it up to the stress of the trial. The second month came and went, and she still wrote it off. But when the other symptoms started to appear—morning sickness, tender breasts, a tightening stomach—she was sure. Pregnant.

At least the other women, especially her cellmate, Celia, treated her well. They helped her with her floor duties as soon as she told them she was pregnant. They also helped her hide the pregnancy, giving her advice on how to wear her orange jumpsuit pulled out in front and how to take extra food helpings, so the guards thought she was just getting fat until she got by her first trimester and abortion was out of the question.

Rene knew they couldn’t force abortion on her, but she didn’t want to listen to the push-for-it talks she heard they put out to women who came into prison pregnant. She didn’t even let the prison doctor test her until she was certain she was past the three-month marker.

Knowing the exact date wasn’t difficult. She and Keith were only together two days, and they only slipped once. One time. But one time was enough.

Not that she regretted being pregnant. She didn’t. When the prison doctor confirmed the pregnancy, she hugged him to the point he had to pry her arms away from his shoulders. She

wanted a child, even though she didn't like the idea of carrying the bulk of her pregnancy over a six-month prison sentence .

Things could be worse, though. She could be in federal prison, three counties away, rather than the Cuyahoga County Correctional Institute where her mother could visit. She could be doing three years. But she wasn't. She had her mother, and she would be out before the baby was due.

The washer spun to a stop. She got up and started moving the clothes into separate dryers. The only thing left to figure out was whether she wanted to tell Keith he was about to become a father. A twist of the dryer dial, and lint-laden heat surged out, gently swooping up her legs to her belly.

Chapter 44

Rene

Rene tipped back in the molded plastic chair in the visiting area. The basement room felt even tighter, more compressed, than the ground floor of the prison. Thirty or so inmates were jammed, two apiece, at folding wood-grain tables. Some of the visitors were in place. The room smelled of sweat and teamed with cackling voices.

The inmate on Rene's right, no more than an arm's length away, coughed and rubbed the tip of her upturned nose. A little wide-eyed girl—five, maybe six-years-old—burst through the metal gate as a guard swung it open, her small hand pulling away from a plump woman with tight, steel gray curls. The girl raced forward, her arms open, a brilliant white smile on her face.

“Mommie!”

A guard stepped forward from his post against the concrete wall and positioned himself between the mother and child. “No touching permitted.”

The little girl frowned. Her small hands went to her hips. “You're a mean Mr. Mustard Man.”

Rene smiled. The mother laughed and motioned the little girl to sit down across from her. The girl flounced into place while the gray-haired woman caught up and stood in the background.

“Hello, mother,” the inmate said, her voice starched.

“Hello, Patricia. You look well, or as well as can be expected,” the older woman replied in an equally starched voice.

Voyeur, Rene thought. She felt as though an imaginary window shielded her from the trio. Her eyes moved from the quick animated flicks of the mother's hands to the bouncing bottom of the little girl against the orange plastic chair to the disapproving face of the grandmother.

She reached for her stomach and wondered if she and her mother would turn out the same way. Would her mother sit across from her, lancing tight little words at her? She wondered if any daughters raised their children to suit their mothers.

Rene took a deep breath and tore her eyes away, looking up to the large cake pan window at the top of the basement wall. Snow drifted to the thick layer of earth pressed against the triple-pane glass. She squinted and focused on the wet-feathered flakes, trying to pull her mind away from what she'd seen raging in the woman's head beside her. Rape. Pain. Mutilation. A knife plunging into her inner thigh so deep it struck the bone and left her marked with a lightning bolt scar.

There wasn't any point in talking to the woman. Rene already knew it wouldn't erase her pain. Nothing would, at least not within the confines of prison. Punishment was a moot venture. It wasn't like the woman didn't already want a life outside of crime, outside of prostitution. She needed a decent job, a decent life, maybe a decent man, one who would treat both her and her child right.

Rene's gaze floated downward. The woman stretched her arms across the table and helped her little girl flatten a piece of paper. The page unfolded to show a towering crayoned house surrounded by trees topped with thick circular leaves. A line of stick people held hands, and a stick dog stood off to the side.

Rene forced her eyes away again. She stared at the fake wood surface of the table in front of her and thought about her ex-husband. Bill was a decent man, and he certainly deserved better than the loveless marriage she gave him. Maybe the woman sitting next to her could do better. Bill loved kids. He always said he wanted a half dozen of them. Maybe he'd be willing to give the woman a job. Maybe even a ticket to Montana. Maybe even an advance to get an apartment.

Rene sighed. The world was full of maybes. But how many of them turned into reality?

The chair across from her creaked. She looked up to see her mother straightening the collar on her crisp white shirt with an indignant tug. "What in the world is wrong with that woman?"

"What woman?" Rene asked, although she was fairly certain she already knew the answer.

"The Warden." Her mother's hand went to her hair, smoothing the tight strands leading back to the bun at the base of her skull. "This is the first time they've agreed to let me visit. Like a mother shouldn't be allowed to visit her own daughter. And before she would even let

me come down here, she asked me questions no woman should ask another woman about her daughter. Why would she do such a thing? Did you do something wrong?"

Rene laughed. "Yes, I started an internal FBI investigation."

"Oh," her mother said, her dark eyes flitting around the room, brushing across the other inmates. "It's noisy in here. Why can't they let you visit separately, or in those little booths?"

"I have no idea. It's the first time I've been here."

"You mean they wouldn't let Jake in to see you, either? I haven't seen him for a while—not since he went off to California to take care of the studio—but the last time we spoke, he said he was coming to discuss some business with you."

"Nope. The only way I can talk with him is the same way I used to talk with you. A collect telephone call."

"Did you know they charge nearly ten dollars for a call from a correctional facility?"

Rene shook her head. She knew they recorded all calls. She also knew they ran a background announcement, "This call originates from an Ohio correctional facility," every three minutes. But she had no idea they charged more than the usual long distance collect rate.

"I can pay you back," she said. "Just ask Jake to cut you a check."

"Don't worry about it. I have money. You know that."

"Yes, but you should save some of it. You never know when you might need a little." She glanced at the woman and the little girl. The girl's cerulean eyes met hers. Nothing. No flashes. Thank heavens. She shifted in her chair, pulled her hair out from behind her, and draped it over her shoulder. "I need to ask you something."

Their eyes met. There was an arched expression on her mother's face. "So ask. But not about your father. I don't want to talk about—"

"No, it's not about that. I need to ask you. . ." How could she ask? Or ask without sounding whacked in the head? She adjusted in her seat again. "Do you see things?"

"Well, of course, I see things." Her mother clicked her tongue. "I have two good eyes. I can see that you're pregnant, if that's what you mean."

Rene folded her arms across her stomach. "That's not what I mean."

"Ah." Her mother dragged the word out as though she were tasting it, turning it over in her mouth, lapping her tongue at it. "You mean visions."

“Yes. Visions. Do you get them?”

“No, but your grandmother said she did.”

“Did you believe her?”

Her mother stared past her in glazed, distant thought. “Yes, I believed her. She always seemed to know when something bad was about to happen, or. . .well, when we ran across someone she thought of as evil. She would say, ‘Do you see that man over there? He’s evil. Don’t go near him.’” A weak smile came to the corner of her lips. “She even used to call me, something she didn’t like doing. Telephones weren’t to her liking. If your grandfather hadn’t insisted on having one, she probably wouldn’t have lived within fifty miles of one. She said the wires for electricity and telephone were a waste, that they interrupted nature, destroyed the balance of things.”

“But she called you?”

“Yes.” Her mother stopped to brush a piece of lint from her sleeve. “She would call and tell me whenever she thought you were in danger. Bicycle accidents. Swimming. Things she wanted me to prevent you from doing. Not altogether. Just on a particular day, or sometimes for a week or so.”

It made sense. Rene remembered her mother telling her she couldn’t do things, forbiddances that seemed unreasonable, at least at the time. But a telephone call? She couldn’t recall if her grandmother called right before the incidents or not.

“She also told me you had the gift,” her mother said, calmly, as if discussing whether to use oats or saltines in meatloaf. “She said I should prepare you for it.”

Rene felt her mouth gape. She didn’t want it to. The words made her angry, but her mouth felt surprised, as though it had a will of its own. “So why didn’t you?”

“Why didn’t I what?”

“Prepare me.”

Her mother tugged her sleeve hard. “I prepared you. I taught you to trust your instincts. I told you how special you were, that you had gifts other people didn’t.”

“But you never told me that my grandmother had visions, or that I might eventually get them.”

Her mother’s eyes met hers, firm, hard. “No, I didn’t.”

“Why? Why in hell would you—?”

“Don’t cuss,” her mother said between tightened lips. “I taught you better.”

“Okay, fine, so why didn’t you tell me?”

“You weren’t ready, and by the time you were, you weren’t willing to listen to anything I had to say. And, later. . .well, I didn’t know enough to decide whether to tell you or not. You didn’t let me into your life. You barely spoke to me. In fact, if I hadn’t pushed, you wouldn’t have spoken to me at all. We just. . .” Her mother stopped and rubbed her eyes as though she wanted to rub out the past. “We just started to get to know one another again. I’m sorry. I probably should’ve told you, but I didn’t think you. . .I just didn’t think you needed to know.”

Rene leaned back. She didn’t want to admit she was partly at fault. She wanted to blame her mother, feel angry, hold someone accountable for everything she’d gone through. But she couldn’t. Her mother was right. Before meeting Buddy, she wasn’t ready to know. And afterwards? Well, afterwards they weren’t a mother and daughter any more, not in the sense they should’ve been.

“It goes both ways,” Rene said. “I should’ve told you I had them, but. . .” Her eyes drifted back to the woman and the little girl. The pair were laughing. Should she tell her mother about what she saw? What she saw in her father’s eyes? “Some things are very hard to share.” Other things shouldn’t be shared, she thought. “And you’re right. Our relationship wasn’t strong enough.”

Her mother blinked and stared at the window. The snow had thickened to equal the layer of earth. “That was the past,” her mother said. “We need to forgive it and move on.”

“Yes,” Rene said. There wasn’t any point in holding her mother accountable. Nor herself. Not really.

“So, do you intend to tell me about my grandchild?”

Rene smiled. “I just did.”

“Why didn’t you tell me beforehand? I could’ve—”

“Could’ve what?”

Her mother sighed. “I suppose you’re right. I couldn’t have done much, could I?”

“Later,” Rene said. “You can do things later.”

A broad smile broke across her mother's face. "Yes, I'd like that. You can't imagine how much I've wanted a grandchild. Is Jake the father?"

"Jake? What would make you think Jake's the father?"

"I don't know." Her mother shifted in her seat, staring first at the child beside her, and then at the child's grandmother, before turning back.

"Jake's in love with someone else," Rene said.

"Someone else?"

"Yes, someone who doesn't look like me."

A blank look came across her mother's face for a moment. "Well, that's good, I suppose. I just—"

"It's okay. I understand. You like Jake. You already think of him as a son-in-law, but he's not the father. That much I can assure you."

"Well. . .is it asking too much for me to know who is?"

Rene thought a moment. Was it? Or did it even matter? "No, you're fully within your rights to ask, but it isn't important."

"Isn't important?" Her mother's hand shot up in the air. "A child needs a father. How can you say it isn't important? Have you even told him? Do you even know who the father is?"

"Yes, I know who the father is!" Rene slapped her palm on the table. "What do you think I am? A whore?"

The room fell silent. A pen dropped on the floor from the table beside them. Rene glanced around the room. Dozens of images rushed over her: rape, incest, abortion, miscarriages, child birth. The pictures fluttered in a mass until she closed her eyes and forced them away, forced herself to think about her own child's conception.

"I'm sorry," her mother said. "I shouldn't have said that. It was wrong of me. I didn't mean to hurt you. I was just upset that—"

"I understand," and she did. She understood more than her mother realized. Trying to decide what was best for her child occupied her mind continually. "I just. . .well, I'm not sure I want to tell the father. I'm not even sure if he wants to be a father."

Her mother shook her head in a sad, slow no. "How will you know unless you tell him?"

"Maybe it's more about whether I think he'd be a good father."

“Oh,” her mother said. The chatter of the other people in the room filled the space between them. “Well, you know I’m willing to help.”

A squeal came from the little girl next to them. The grandmother smiled and ran her finger’s through the child’s hair. The mother laughed.

“Yes, I think we’ll all manage,” Rene said. And she had a feeling they would, eventually.

Chapter 45

Jake

Sitting in a frigid screening room, listening to Edward Pance bitch, wasn't Jake's idea of a good afternoon. A beach, some deep sea fishing, even a root canal sounded better. But Pance was the lead director hired by the production company to handle Unity's latest big dollar investment, and he had some valid complaints. Plus, the project included North, and Jake needed to deal with him.

Pance's hand shot up. "Stop! Back up."

The thick carpet deadened the high nasal whine of Pance's voice, but Jake still rubbed the side of his forehead with irritation. The projector threw fast, flickering shadows around the room. Twenty rows of seats linked arms down the middle of the theater. Pance and his collection of assistants took up the front center, and the actors were spaced out toward the back.

Each time Pance shouted, the picture froze on the screen, and the participants straightened in their seats, their shoulders locked in place, ready for another onslaught. The whole thing resembled a ghoulish game of red rover.

"Jeezus-h-christ, would you look at that?" Pance tugged at his dirt-blond hair, pulling pieces loose from the tight ponytail at the base of his neck while his assistants scribbled on their notepads. "How are we going to get around that? She's supposed to look sympathetic, for God's sake."

Jake rubbed his hands together and blew on them. He focused on North and Kandet. North sat six rows from the back, ankle on knee, his face calm, or at least what appeared calm from a distance. Kandet sat two rows behind North and seemed more distraught, swiping at her hair every few seconds. The shot on the screen included her and several minor supporting actors representing soldiers in a civil war field hospital. Kandet's face looked contorted, more like anger or annoyance than compassion as she bent over a soldier, reaching out to adjust his dirty bandages dripping with blood.

Pance stood and paced the aisle. Several seconds passed before he came to a halt beside Kandet. “What the HELL were you thinking?” He flung his hand at the screen. “Twenty-two takes, and you couldn’t put out one decent emotion?”

Kandet tossed her head. Her wavy red hair spilled over the back of the theater seat. “You know I couldn’t act under those conditions. I told you from the very first day this wasn’t going to work, putting Keith and me in the same movie after he treated me so shitty. What did you expect?”

She had a point. Pance insisted on casting her after Elizabeth Hutter, the actor originally contracted to do the part, got injured in a car accident. They’d already contracted North to replace Brent Collins, who bailed on his contract, citing an emergency medical issue. The film was riddled with problems, and dropping Kandet into the pot bordered on lunacy. Pance had to know the tabloids were ripping her apart, and her relationship with North was unstable. Matching the pair in a film nearly guaranteed failure.

“You’re an actor for Christ’s sake! Why not try acting?” Pance thrust his hands behind his back and started pacing the aisle again.

The low hum of the projector filled the theater. The air smelled sterile. Jake leaned back in his seat and brought his foot to his knee. No one said anything as Pance strode to the front of the theater and back again.

Pance stopped, turned, and pointed at North. “And you!”

North didn’t look at Pance. His eyes stayed on the screen.

“If they actually let us salvage this piece of shit and re-shoot some of these scenes, you’d better keep your fucking dick in your pants, or I’ll personally cut the damned thing off!”

Jake wiped at his mouth to keep from laughing. Pance was right. Everyone talked about how North screwed everything in sight, especially during the first half of the filming process. And it was a sure bet he did it just to piss off Kandet, even though, judging from the product, he wound up screwing himself, more than anyone else.

“Do you hear me?” Pance shouted.

North nodded.

“Good!”

Pance stormed up the aisle and out the door. A trail of assistants jumped from their seats and stumbled after him, clutching their yellow notepads and pens. Standing, Kandet wiped the tears from her cheeks, flung her hair back, and stuck her chin out in an indignant pose before she walked out. The other people, with the exception of North, who continued staring at the frozen picture on the screen, filtered out. Nobody talked beyond a few mumbles. Brent Walks, a supporting actor with a puffed out chest and ice pick legs, stood, his face bunched, watching North for several seconds, as though he considered chewing North out himself, until he shook his head and headed out the door.

From a business perspective, releasing the film straight to video would be the best solution for everyone involved. Make what they could, write off the rest, and be done with it. Even a neophyte could see the film stunk. North did a good job, both in and out of scenes with Kandet, but getting around Kandet's piss-poor acting edged toward impossible. Her anger showed up like a fly on the projector in at least sixty percent of her shots.

Still, Jake had already made his decision. He intended to offer North a deal. Even if he didn't visit Rene in prison, and they handled all of their business communications through memos, he still knew about her pregnancy. Very few secrets existed between him and Irene. They had a strong relationship before Gar's death, and afterwards, it strengthened even more. Irene came to share most of her concerns with him, and the paternity of her grandchild bothered her.

Both Jake and Irene knew Rene's trip to Los Angeles in October, right before the start of the trial, didn't have much, if anything, to do with signing the power of attorney papers to put him in charge of Unity. Any number of attorneys could've handled the paperwork from Ohio. It was obvious Rene went to Los Angeles to visit North, and that visit produced a child.

Neither Jake nor Irene knew if Rene wanted to continue her connection with North,. But if she did, somebody needed to straighten North out, spin him around and head him back to the place he was when she first met him.

Broaching the subject would be difficult, though. Rene made her instructions clear. "People can read about my trial in the newspapers or look up my prison sentence in the court records. Otherwise, I want your official position to remain 'no comment'. I don't want you to

talk to anyone about it—not the press, not anyone at Unity, not anyone connected with Unity, not even some poor sot walking down the street. Do you understand?”

Jake understood. They needed to get back to business. Denying fuel to the gossip train would limit the number of days it had on the tracks.

But after he learned of her pregnancy, he tried to put a hole in her directives by asking if he could at least tell their associates at Unity when she intended to step in a CEO. Her response came back even more adamant. It, along with her refusal to acknowledge North’s paternity, cinched his suspicions. She didn’t want North to feel obligated, at least not out of pity over her prison sentence, and definitely not because she was the controlling stockholder and future CEO of Unity.

Her instructions didn’t prevent him from running the studio however he saw fit, though. A studio CEO wouldn’t normally get involved in the filming process of a production company. But nothing said he couldn’t. Especially if the studio had a sizeable amount of money invested in the project.

“Start the film again,” he said in an authoritative voice. The screen flickered and rolled forward. “Bring the volume down.”

North stood, tugged at his belt loops, and started to leave.

“No,” Jake said. “You stay!”

North’s hand went to his eyebrows.

Jake stood up, adjusted his coat, and walked down the aisle to where North stood with a puzzled look on his face. Jake held out his hand. “We haven’t been formally introduced, but my name’s—”

“I know who you are.” North stared at his hand, but didn’t take it. “What do you want?”

Jake couldn’t blame him for the response. Not considering how they met in Montana, and their shared relationship with Rene. Plus, it was hard to tell what J.S. might have said. “I believe we have a mutual interest.”

“Screw Rene.”

Jake laughed. “I would say you’ve already done that.”

“Ha ha, very fucking funny, you’re a real comedian. So, that’s what this is all about. You’ve come to gloat over the fact Rene dumped me.”

North's response told Jake two things. One, North wanted more than a lay from Rene. If he didn't, he wouldn't be so pissed, and he wouldn't consider himself "dumped." Two, it confirmed North was clueless about Rene's prison sentence, or he would realize she didn't just walk out on him.

Well, good. At least the approach he had in mind might work. "Scarcely, I already know how Rene can be when it comes to walking out on people, and I'm not interested in trading notes on the subject. I'm here to see if you're prepared to do whatever it takes to turn this piece of shit," he said, motioning to the screen, "into something saleable, or maybe even more than saleable."

North's forehead pinched. "I thought you were—"

"I honestly don't care what you thought. I'm the one in charge of Unity Studio, and if you want to salvage your career, or at least whatever future you might have with Unity, I suggest you take a seat and listen to what I have to say."

North glanced at the door before sitting down. Jake slid around him and took the seat beside him. Both men sat quiet a moment before Jake began to talk. He skipped the past and went straight for the present.

Chapter 46

J.S.

J.S. folded Rene's letter and placed it back into the envelope. He opened the closet. The sun from the bay window overlooking the valley filled the bedroom, brightening the white walls and white shirts spaced out on hangers. His black cotton slacks hung straight, clipped in place by their legs.

He looked up. The cardboard box filled with the letters Rene sent him while he was in prison stuck out from the shelf. Pulling it down, he thumbed through the stack of yellowed envelopes, worn from reading. Ten years, and little brown girl wrote to him every single week, never forgot. He couldn't begin to spit out how much her small curly-Q words meant. Every time one of the prison mail clerks choked out his name, he jackrabbitted to the front of the room, grabbed the envelope, and sniffed it. He swatted away the laughter, just so he could suck up the scent of the world—sweet, fresh. It didn't matter that dozens of grubby hands had smeared most of the smell away before the letter landed in his lap.

A tear rolled down his cheek. He wiped it away with his arm and wondered if Rene felt the same way—if she opened his letters, smelled them, and smiled. He sure hoped so because that's why he wrote them. He wanted her to smile.

J.S. flipped the envelope over in his hands. Should he find a new box? He shook his head. No, the prison letters needed to stay together, right where he could look at them whenever he thought about doing something stupid that might land his sorry self back in the same spot.

"Hey!" Keith's voice echoed from the bottom of the staircase.

J.S. felt numb. He didn't understand why Rene waited so long to write. Even if she didn't want the ignorant daddy knowing, she should've told him sooner. Being an uncle was serious business. He needed to pull himself up by the drawers and get a move on if he planned to help her. She only had another two months in prison, and another two after she got out before she popped the kid.

Keith burst through the doorway. The tang of cooked tomatoes drifted in with him. "You won't believe what happened today."

“I really don’t care.” It was a lousy response, but J.S. didn’t feel like talking, especially with Keith.

Keith frowned. “What’s wrong with you?”

J.S. closed the box and slid it back onto the shelf. His stomach churned. The tomato smell made him feel like puking. Stress. It had to be something like that. His one friend alone, in prison, about to have a baby, while his other friend, the daddy, stood there looking stupid.

Anger welled up in him. His fists knotted at his sides. Everything inside of him wanted to smack Keith dead across the face. Why didn’t stupid-ass white boy at least ask about Rene, what happened to her, where she was, how she was doing, if her head got stuck in a bucket, or something, anything?

Keith’s eyes drifted to J.S.’s fists and back to his face. “What? You’re going to kick my ass? What for?”

J.S. pulled his suitcase down from the closet and slammed it on the bed. He needed to beat feet out of there. Bouncing Keith up one wall and back down the other wouldn’t get Rene out of prison or make her any less pregnant.

Besides, he only had himself to blame. No, that wasn’t true. He didn’t have sex with her, so he couldn’t blame his sorry self for everything. Sure, he told her to go and get herself laid. He even pushed her brown butt out the door and on the way down the road to L.A., but he thought Keith had more sense than to start banging the headboard without a helmet. And what about Rene? She knew better.

His fingers froze on the clasp. Did she plan it? She sounded happy as a yellow smiley about it in her letter, so maybe she wanted to get pregnant. He shook his head. No, that didn’t sound right. She thought she had a fifteen-year trip to the box ahead of her. Maybe she was stupid enough to get pregnant to begin with, but she surely wasn’t stupid enough to deliberately start a family thinking she had enough prison ahead of her to put the kid through middle-school. It didn’t turn out that way. She only got six months. But she didn’t know that. Not when she and Keith had sex.

J.S. felt Keith’s hand on his shoulder. He reached up and knocked it off. “Don’t touch me. I’m leaving.”

Keith stepped back. “You’re leaving? Why?”

J.S. turned and glared at the wall over Keith's head. "You think everyone and everything revolves around you and your little-ass world. Will it ever sink into your puny brain that people might have something else going on outside of you and what's eating at you? Hell, you don't even read the newspaper."

Keith scratched his head. "The newspaper? You're mad at me because I don't read the newspaper? I don't read it because I don't like reading it. Hell, I barely even read the tabloids or the trade papers. I'm just not interested in reading them except when Brandy tells me there's something I need to look at." He stopped a moment. His nostrils flared. "And what do you mean I think everything revolves around me? I don't think that at all. I know you have your own life, and I don't interfere in it, or at least I don't think I do. You pretty much do whatever you want, so I don't think I wrap your life up except for what you do on the job."

J.S. threw his hands up, disgusted. Keith wasn't listening. He never did. He was full of talk, but no listening. "I don't know why I'm wasting my breath. You aren't going to change, and you probably wouldn't give a shit about what's going on, anyway."

Keith folded his arms across his chest. "I might, if I knew what was chewing at your ass."

"No, you wouldn't. I can tell by the way you're acting you think I'm just flapping my gums, and I don't know anything." J.S. walked to the dresser and yanked open a drawer. He scooped up an armload of clothes and dropped them in the suitcase.

"How am I acting?"

"Like an asshole."

Keith flopped down in the overstuffed chair beside the bed. "I should've figured. First Rene, and now you."

J.S. stopped a moment and stared at the suitcase. White boy had better not start griping about Rene. That was the last thing he needed to do. "First Rene, and now me what?"

"Both of you come into my life and then take off without telling me why. At least you told me you're leaving. Rene didn't even say that much."

"Did you ask?" J.S. grabbed another armful of clothing and flung it at the suitcase. "Did you even fucking ask?" Dirty mad, that's the only way he could describe how he felt. He never should've introduced them to start with. Keith already had too much shit in his head for one

white boy to handle, and he wasn't any much but a pebble toss from Buddy when it came to women. "All you ever do is get shit faced and screw, and I'm sick of it."

Keith jumped up and flailed his arms. "I know! All right? That's all I've been hearing today, so I get the point, okay?"

They stood there glaring at each other, their chests rising and falling, fists clenched. J.S. pulled away first and started packing again. No point in arguing. Keith wouldn't, couldn't understand, and he sure wouldn't, couldn't tell him. His hug-tight-to-the-chest promise to Rene came first, no matter how much he and Keith pal'd around.

Keith's body loosened. "Look, I'm not sure why you're mad, but I wish you'd finish what you started to say. I know you wouldn't get mad at me if you didn't have a good reason, so I want to hear it."

J.S. took a deep breath. "If you want to hear it, I'll tell you, but you aren't going to like it, and I'm not saying it twice, because like it or not, I'm leaving. Whether I come back later is up to you, but for now, I'm leaving before I wind up beating the white out of you. You get that?"

Keith's forehead wrinkled.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes," Keith said, even though J.S. was sure he didn't.

"First, you treat Andrea like shit. You go around calling her a bitch. Hell, I can understand that." J.S. shook his head. "I didn't like her myself. But you didn't need to tear her apart. You knew how it felt, and you shouldn't have done the same to her. Not counting all the women you screwed over in the process."

Keith nodded. "You're right. I already heard that earlier today, and I agree."

J.S. felt his eyebrow spike up, but he wasn't going to stop to ask questions, not in the middle of saying what he had to say. "Then there's Rene. She's the only family I ever had, well, her and Buddy, but Buddy's dead now, so she's it. You know that. I told you that. I also told you that you felt like family to me."

"Yes, and I've always valued you."

"No, you haven't. You gave me a job. You liked me. But valued me?" J.S. shook his head. "I thought you did until you screwed Rene."

"I thought you were okay with us, with the fact we had sex."

J.S. waved his arms in frustration. How stupid could one white boy be? “I’m not talking about sex. Sex is sex. That’s not what I’m talking about. Hell, I’m the one who chased her off to have sex with you to begin with. I’m surely not going to be mad about it now.”

“You told her to have sex with me?”

“Yes, I told her. Right before she. . .” Damn. Even if he didn’t understand Rene’s stupid-brained reason for not wanting him to tell Keith about her being in prison, he still promised her he wouldn’t, so he couldn’t.

“Right before she what?”

J.S. opened another dresser drawer and started pulling clothes out. He kept his back to Keith. His emotions were smacking around inside of his head, ping, ding, ring like a pinball. Frustration, anger, sadness, he wasn’t sure which one he felt the most. But he wasn’t going to let Keith see him get all salty and start crying. “She told me I couldn’t tell you unless. . .” He stopped and ran his fingers around the collar of his shirt. Maybe there was a way around breaking his word to Rene. “Shit, bro,” he said, his voice softening. “I really wish you read the newspaper. We sure could skip past a lot of shit.”

“What’s with the newspaper? I don’t understand why you keep saying that.” Keith brought his hands from his waist up, out and down like a strange breaststroke. “I mean, I understand it. Apparently there was something in the news I needed to know. But if you don’t tell me, how am I going to know about it now? Do you want me to have someone dig it up? I can, you know. In fact, if you don’t tell me, that’s exactly what I’ll do. I’ll either ask someone, or I’ll go to the newspaper office and pay them to give me copies.”

Keith turned to leave, but J.S. stopped him, saying, “No, you don’t need to. Maybe there’s a way I can. . .” Think, he instructed himself. He wasn’t some stupid con who couldn’t figure things out. He’d figured plenty out over the last year and a half since he’d gotten out of prison.

He sat on the bed next to the suitcase. His fingers toyed with the edge of the blue denim comforter, and he stared out the window at the red flowers on the coral trees spreading down the hillside. “Tell me what you want to know. What you really want to know, and don’t just ask me why I’m leaving. Ask me the thing you want to know more than anything.”

Keith flopped back into the chair beside the bed and stared at the wall. “Why did Rene come to see me?”

J.S. rolled his eyes. “Why do you think?”

“Okay, okay.” Keith’s forehead knotted. “So why did she take off afterwards? Where did she go? I thought we had something, not just sex. I thought we had something more. I told her I wanted to—”

“She had to go back to Ohio because she had a court date.”

“A court date? For what? Something to do with her father’s estate?”

J.S. laughed. It wasn’t funny, but it was. “Sort of.”

Keith clicked his tongue and shook his head. “That’s not an answer.”

“Sorry, bro, it’s complicated. She had to go to court because the FBI charged her with racketeering and obstruction.”

Keith leaned forward. “Why? I mean, what did she do?” He waved his hand. “Never mind. What happened? Where’s she now?”

“In prison.” J.S. stood up and started shoving more clothes into his suitcase. “And that’s why I’m going back to Ohio. I want to be there when she gets out.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this beforehand?”

J.S. shook his head. “You didn’t ask, and Rene made me promise not to tell you unless you did. Probably because she figured if you weren’t interested enough to ask, then she wasn’t interested in you knowing.”

“It wasn’t that I wasn’t interested. I just thought she didn’t. . .well, maybe she didn’t enjoy herself enough to—”

J.S. belted out a hard laugh, letting it ripple from his belly, up through his chest until it fell from his mouth. He couldn’t help it. The idea of Rene not enjoying sex was purely dumb-headed funny. Even if he never had sex with her himself, he listened to Buddy and Jake enough to know she enjoyed herself plenty.

Keith frowned. “What’s so funny? I don’t see I said anything all that funny.”

J.S. stopped laughing and rubbed his stomach. “You’re some kind of stupid, you know that?”

“I don’t think I’m stupid. I just think Rene has a strong—well, never mind what I think. How’s Rene doing? Is she okay?”

J.S. thought about the question a moment. Rene told him not to tell Keith she was pregnant, but he didn’t promise her diddly-do. Did he? No, he didn’t. She just wrote to him about it, and he hadn’t answered yet, so she couldn’t say he broke his word.

Even if Keith was a self-centered brat and didn’t have a penny-candy’s worth of sense when it came to Rene, he was still the daddy. No doubt about that. Otherwise, Rene wouldn’t have said she didn’t want him to know. Besides, Keith not asking about her didn’t have anything to do with not caring. Stupid-ass white boy just thought his dick wasn’t good enough. Ha. Now that surely was funny.

Keith said, “Do I need to ask something more specific?”

“No, I was just thinking how to tell you.”

“I don’t care how you tell me. Just tell me. Is she okay? I mean, I know she can’t be doing great since she’s in prison, but is she—”

“She’s pregnant.”

The gaping, wide-eyed look on Keith’s face made J.S. wish he could snap it up in a photograph and shove it in a frame. He could imagine showing a picture to “the kid.” That’s all he could think of it as now, “the kid.” But he hoped the kid would think of him as an uncle, and he could sit, bouncing the kid on his knee, and say, “Look, this here’s a picture of your daddy the day I told him you were coming.”

“Is she, is it. . .?” Keith sputtered.

“She’s okay,” J.S. said. “And yes, it’s yours, if that’s what you’re trying to ask me. Did you think it could be anyone else’s?”

“No,” Keith said, his voice firm. “That isn’t what I meant. I know it’s mine. She wasn’t. . .” He stopped. “Well, she wasn’t easy.”

J.S. laughed. “And she never will be, bro.”

Keith stared at the wall, a blank sheet of paper look on his face as his fingers drummed the arm of the chair. J.S. pulled his clothes out of the suitcase and started folding them one-by-one, placing them back. His stomach grumbled. He wondered what Mrs. Bumbe had cooking in the kitchen and how long it would take his pal to start packing.

Chapter 47

Keith

Keith stopped in front of the prison door and took one last deep breath before he entered. The lobby smelled of Windex. The room felt tight, long and narrow with gray speckled tiles and matching gray walls. A large portrait of a solid black woman with tightly drawn hair and a stern expression on her face, hung on the wall to his left. The brass placard below the frame read *Warden Gwen Thomas*.

The woman behind the thick Plexiglas stared at him through hard brown eyes, her oak-colored hair tucked behind her ears. “May I help you?”

“Yes, I’m here to visit Rene Matio.”

“Your name?” Her eyes remained on him. “Actually, I know who you are, but I still need to ask. Regulations require it. You’ll also have to show a valid photograph identification.”

Keith pulled out his wallet and slid his driver’s license through the half-moon opening between the two sides of the Formica counter. “Keith Andrew North.”

The woman stared at the license and back at him before returning it. “I’ll pull the file and check inmate Matio’s acceptance list, but I should probably say I already know you’re not on it.”

J.S. warned him about visiting regulations and how a list determined whether he could get in or not and how Rene may not be able to change her list on such a short notice or how she might not want to. “No, you don’t need to check. She isn’t expecting me, but I’d like to see about getting on the list.”

A piece of paper appeared from beneath the counter and fell on a clipboard with a loud click. The woman secured a loose strand of hair behind her ear and angled the clipboard and a pen through the opening. “Fill out this form and return it to me. After the Warden approves the application, the prisoner has to sign her agreement before you’re permitted to enter for visitation. The process takes about two months.”

“Two months?” Stay polite, he reminded himself. “I’m sorry, I don’t mean to seem ungracious, but I know she’ll be out in less than two months, and it’s important I speak with her beforehand. Is there anyway we can speed up the process?”

The woman hesitated, as though she needed time to comb the rules over in her mind. “You can speak to the Warden, if you like. I can’t guarantee she’ll see you, but if you want to have a seat and fill out the form, I’ll check.”

“Thank you.”

The woman ambled off, her tight nylon pants swishing as she walked to the back of the small cubicle and disappeared through a metal security door. Keith plopped into one of the wooden office chairs lining the wall by the door. He wondered if Rene would agree to see him. He didn’t see why she wouldn’t. They didn’t part on bad terms. She just didn’t tell him she was leaving or why she had to or anything at all, really. But she didn’t know she was carrying his child at the time, either. Surely, she would agree to see him now, even if she didn’t consider him. . . a what? a boyfriend? That sounded too childish. A lover? That sounded too French. He felt certain she considered him a friend, but that sounded so impersonal.

Keith tapped the pen on the edge of the clipboard as he stared at the last line on the form. *Please state your relationship to the inmate.* With a quick scrawl, he wrote, *Father of her child.* The answer might push him through. That is, if the Warden had any sense of decency, which he imagined she did. Why wouldn’t a Warden allow inmates to connect with the outside world for parental reasons?

He signed the completed form and placed the clipboard on the seat beside him. His hips ached against the hard wood. Five hours on the plane, a dozen phone calls to locate a hotel in the midst of a Rubber Workers Convention. Not to mention pacing the floor last night while he considered everything J.S. told him about how Rene landed in prison, and meeting Rene’s mother earlier in this morning. All of it left him feeling physically and mentally drained.

Leaning forward, Keith rubbed his eyes. He refused to let exhaustion interfere with his opportunity to talk with Rene. Whether she wanted him or not, or even if she planned to tell him, he intended to share in the parenting of his child, and she needed to get that straight.

His eyes moved to the camera positioned in the far, upper corner of the room while his thoughts drifted across what it might be like to play in the sand or balance a set of training wheels or even change a diaper. He hoped Rene didn’t intend to deny him the chance to experience such things. He’d rather they share them, but if not, he still wanted her to understand how much he wanted, no, needed to participate in his child’s life.

Being an absent or distant parent, like his own, was something he promised himself never to be. Not that his grandparents weren't good to him. They were. They raised him with enough love and understanding for twenty people, and he never lacked for anything. His grandparents' farm and schools presented suitable surroundings, but that wasn't the point. He never wanted his child to doubt his love, to wonder who and where he was, or why he wasn't there on birthdays or holidays, like he had with his own parents.

Keith brought his ankle to his knee. He rubbed the sweat from his hands onto his pants. J.S. was right. He should've read the newspapers sooner. Rene occupied a segment of the front page for two straight weeks, and the investigation her trial sparked still blared across the headlines. Why hadn't he heard about it on the radio? The television? Something?

Keith shook his head. He already knew the answer. J.S. summed it up. He just didn't care about what went on in the outside world or what happened beyond his own life. The music on the radio interested him, but only for brief snippets, and the news didn't interest him at all. If the announcer talked too much or a news program came on, he switched channels, and he never listened to the radio at home. Why should he? He had a thousand cassette tapes, more than enough music to listen to without bothering with the radio.

Television felt more like work than entertainment. Outside of the occasional soccer or basketball game, he rarely flipped the thing on, or if he did, he found himself examining the directing or the performance—angles, lighting, methods, characterization—all work.

Still, none of that excused him from reading the newspaper. Every day, he had it delivered to the door. Mrs. Bumbe read it. J.S. read it. So why didn't he?

Idiot, he cursed himself. If he'd known earlier, baby or no baby, he would've taken the first flight to Ohio.

Well, at least he found out before Rene got out of prison. And once he did, he not only took the first flight, but convinced J.S. to introduce him to Rene's mother.

What a woman. The first words out of Irene Agite's mouth after their scant introductions were, "I'm not stupid. I couldn't have stayed married to Gar for forty years and not know what's going on in the world. I read the papers, and I used to listen to Gar when he talked about Unity Studios and the stuff you pulled while you were working for him."

Keith didn't say anything. Even with her short stature, Irene Agite carried a presence strong enough to convince the President to resign. He scarcely wanted to tangle with her. Instead, he sat quiet and watched her tap her fingers on the kitchen table while her dark eyes flitted across him, carrying a glint of castration.

J.S. said, "You should see Hollywood, Irene. It's glittery. Nothing like Cleveland. Nothing at all."

Irene ignored J.S., her eyes fixed on Keith. "I know you were involved with Rene. I saw the picture."

Keith said, "Rene thought it was a good picture."

"Yes, it was, but that's beside the point. She doesn't need a philandering actor to make her life any worse than it already is."

Sharp object in her hand or not, Keith understood Irene's point. Rene didn't need a man who drank and screwed around. She didn't talk about her past. But it didn't take much to figure out she needed somebody stable. And she wouldn't be the least bit hesitant to walk out on anyone who didn't set a good example for her child.

Standing, he paced the prison lobby floor, considering how he might convince both Irene and Rene he intended to change. A door sprang open, and the Warden stepped through, coming to life beside her portrait. "Mr. North?"

Keith stepped forward and extended his hand. "Yes, I'm pleased to meet you, Warden Thomas."

Her dark brown eyes shifted to his hand for a brief second before she applied a firm handshake. Her hand felt warm and dry.

"I would say it's a pleasure to meet you, Mr. North." Her eyes met his with what he thought a steady calmness. She motioned to the receptionist, now reinstalled at her post behind the Plexiglas. "But from what Annette's told me, you're expecting some type of favor based on your celebrity status, and I, quite frankly, don't have time to deal with or appreciate that type of grandstanding behavior presented at my prison."

Grandstanding? Keith glanced at Annette and wondered what she told the Warden. It didn't matter. A polite approach should erase whatever negative impression Annette gave her.

“I’m sorry, Warden Thomas. I didn’t mean to make it sound as though I expected a special favor. I simply asked if there was a way to speed up the paperwork process so I could—”

“That is a special favor,” the Warden said in the same unblinking manner. “You’re asking us to change our rules, and unfortunately, this isn’t the first time we’ve had such requests with inmate Matio. A number of people have asked us to break the regulations and allow immediate access to her. To the point, it’s disrupted the operations of this prison. I’m sure you can understand why I can’t allow such a thing to occur. This is a prison, not a news event or a social club for the famous.”

Keith forced his expression to remain passive, even though the Warden’s words irritated him. Rejecting news reporters made sense. But dismissing him in such a tart-worded manner without even asking why he wanted to see Rene seemed malicious, more than the product of the woman’s dislike for celebrities.

Motioning to Annette again, the Warden said, “If you’d like to make a request to see inmate Matio through the normal procedure, we will be glad to handle your request in the same manner we handle all such requests. Otherwise, I suggest you wait until her release to conduct whatever business you have with her.”

Yes, the woman obviously had a sore tooth, probably more to do with Rene than prison regulations. He picked up the clipboard from the chair and detached the paper. “I would, but some of the information on this paper is. . .” With deliberate hesitation, he lowered his voice. “Well, it’s confidential and could cause both Rene and me a great deal of grief if it should happen to fall into the wrong hands.”

The Warden took the paper from his hand. Her eyes floated down to the bottom of the page before she looked up with a brief cock of her eyebrow.

Keith looked at the floor for a second to disguise any thoughts his eyes might throw out to the woman. If she did have a malicious attitude against Rene, he could use it to his advantage. “The tabloids probably wouldn’t pay enough to tempt someone to divulge such information, but I’m afraid something like *Celebrity News Flash* might, and we. . .I mean, the studio releasing my current film and myself, don’t need the complications right now, not with the film scheduled to come out in a couple months. Plus, I’m sure Rene doesn’t need the additional stress, especially this far along in her pregnancy.”

“I see,” the Warden said. “Well, I’m sure your information will be handled with the strictest confidence, just like all of our inmate information, but I’ll process the paperwork myself to make certain it does.”

Keith smiled. He thought she might say something like that. “Okay, I’d greatly appreciate it, and would it be possible for me to leave Rene a note? Does that fall within the rules?”

“Yes, do you need some paper?”

“Please.”

The Warden retrieved a piece of typing paper and an envelope from Annette. Keith sat down and scribbled a few words he felt certain Rene would never see, but with luck, might still produce the results he hoped to achieve.

Chapter 48

Rene

Rene twisted backwards and sideways to place her hand on the chair seat for support. As she eased herself onto the orange plastic, she thought about how much her body resembled a brass bell with her legs serving as the dinger. She never thought she'd be so big at six and a half months pregnant. How could anyone explode so quickly? Two weeks ago, her belly only amounted to a small bump. Now it was huge.

Raindrops splattered against the triple-paned safety glass windows spaced every ten feet near the top of the exterior walls. The ticktack of ping-pong balls and epitaphs of frustrated or angry players came from behind. The pungent smell of body odor drifted from the woman four rows back, mixing with the lighter scent of Ivory soap from the woman sitting two seats over with her eyes pinned on the television.

Rene felt grateful for Ivory soap and the end of her morning sickness. Why people called it morning sickness she would never know. She had it morning, noon, and night, and she swore she never puked so much in her entire life. The thought of grits still turned her stomach. Nothing sat well with her for the first four months of her incarceration. The last half a month went better, at least food-wise, even though the mental images from the other inmates continued to jab at her mind.

Practice, she reminded herself. She focused on the television balanced on a metal ledge protruding from the wall. Avoiding eye contact worked best. If she didn't look straight into the eyes of a person, she couldn't see the things darting around in their head. Plus, if she only came around the other inmates while they were preoccupied with something other than their thoughts, she didn't get hit with the full weight of their suffering. They didn't have time to think about how their brother raped them with an antique Coke bottle until the glass broke and blood seeped down their legs. Or what it was like to hammer a grapefruit sized hole in the skull of their husband. Or why they strung their children up on coat racks and beat them with flattened metal hangers. Or any number of vile acts they relived in their minds.

Some of the inmates needed to dwell on the past, what put them in prison, or what they got away with. Their thoughts, coupled with the long days of their incarceration, were their

punishment. Others needed to relieve themselves, break away from their past. But either way, Rene couldn't change what happened, no more than she could ease the pain they felt. One thing her time in prison taught her, though, was how to guard herself from other people's thoughts, protect herself from the images flashing out of their heads.

"Shit," one of the ping-pong players shouted.

The Warden's voice echoed across the concrete, "Matio!"

Rene turned to see the Warden standing at the large metal gate separating the inmates from the hallway leading to administrative offices. "What now?" she muttered to herself as she grunted off the seat.

The Warden stood with her arms folded across her chest, her foot tapping on the concrete, and her eyes narrowed with one corner of her mouth scrunched.

When Rene discovered she was pregnant, she hoped she could avoid the penguin walk. But no such luck. Her feet flipped out in opposite directions, and every step she took felt like a waddle.

Two-dozen steps, and she reached the gate. The metal mesh surrounding the opening reached to the ceiling and both walls. The guard station loomed above her and to the left, behind the mesh.

The Warden shoved a crumpled white envelope at her. "Here, I forgot to give this to you. It came a few weeks ago."

Rene didn't say anything. Complaining was pointless. She understood the game from the moment she walked through the prison doors, and the Warden led her to the intake area, making her thoughts clear along the way. "I don't impress easily, and women who use the press to ruin a fellow officer impress me even less."

Whether or not Rene controlled the press didn't matter. Whether or not Agent Rancey, the fellow law officer in question, broke the law didn't matter. The Warden viewed her as the enemy and did whatever she could to make time difficult. Misplaced mail, lost canteen money, suspended privileges, denied visitation—anything barely within the rules, or within a difficult to prove range—became a daily occurrence.

Rene nodded and took the letter. The seal splayed open, like all of her mail, but the front of the envelope didn't bear a postmark. She shifted her hand away from her hip and pulled the piece of paper out.

The Warden said, "You know, you should probably watch *Celebrity News Flash* tonight. I think it might interest you."

Rene looked up.

A slow smile spread across the Warden's face. "Yes, I think you might find it very interesting."

The Warden closed the gate and walked off, her head moving from the left to the right, as she checked the empty hallway. The large round clock pinned to the wall beside the guard booth showed 5:57 p.m. *Celebrity News Flash* started at 6:00 p.m. Rene waddled to the television and reached up to switch the channel.

"Hey," a woman in the front row shouted. Her frizzy brown hair bounced up-and-down. "I was watching that."

"So was I," a dark brown, rectangle of a woman sitting two rows back complained with a stomp of her foot for emphasis.

Rene threw her hands up and shrugged an apology. "Sorry, ladies, the Warden told me that I needed to watch the next show."

Both women continued to grumble, but quieted when the *Celebrity News Flash* logo blazed in large red letters across the screen. The electronic theme song started to play. The television let off a loud snap, and the screen flickered for a second.

Rene waddled to her seat. Easing down, she stared at the folded paper in her hand. The women around her started whooping and stomping their feet. She looked up to see pictures of Keith in full civil war uniform flash before her. The baby gave her a solid kick to the midsection. "Yeah, I know," she said, rubbing at the bump protruding from her belly.

The camera zoomed from above to show a close up of Cathy Mosely, the *Celebrity News Flash* host, sitting in a canvas director's chair. "Tonight, as many of you have already ascertained, our first guest is Keith North, who is with us to promote his upcoming film, *After the Gray Fell*." The studio audience applauded along with the shouts of the women in the recreation area.

“Now there’s a fucking hunk,” the woman in front of Rene said.

“Shhh,” another scolded.

Rene smiled. Keith certainly did look good, even in the t-shirt and jeans he chose for the occasion. She didn’t know his promotion schedule, but knew his new film was ready for release, and Jake told her, in a letter, less than a week ago, that the picture had potential.

Cathy Mosley leaned forward in her chair. “But before we discuss your new film, I’d like to ask you something Keith. . .may I call you Keith?”

Keith smiled, propped his ankle on his knee, and brushed at an unseen piece of lint on his pant leg. “Certainly, Cathy. Keith is fine.”

“I recently learned something about your love life, an interesting twist, I suppose you might call it.”

Rene frowned. She didn’t particularly feel like hearing about Keith’s love life, but at least she now understood why the Warden goaded her into watching the show. The Warden probably figured out she once had an affair with Keith, and maybe even connected the dots to her pregnancy.

Keith laced his fingers in his lap. “And what might that be, Cathy?”

“Well, you’ve certainly had your share of interesting twists in your love life, haven’t you?”

Keith ducked his head and tugged at the hem of his jeans. “Yeah, I suppose you could say that.”

“He could park his boots under my bed anytime,” the body odor woman said.

Several women at the ping-pong tables laughed before one of them shouted back, “If he could get by the stench, Julie, he might.”

The camera zoomed in on Cathy Mosley’s face. “So what’s this I hear about your relationship with Rene Matio?”

Rene felt her mouth go dry. The women around her turned to stare. The rain started ticking harder against the safety glass.

The camera shifted to Keith. “Well, Rene and I are involved and have been for quite some time.”

Are? Rene blinked. For quite some time? She blinked again. What in the world was he thinking? They didn't have an ongoing relationship, and saying something like that on national television without asking her ahead of time was more than just a little presumptuous, not to mention self-destructive, considering the press onslaught against her.

Some of the women continued to stare at her with their mouths gaping and their eyes dotted with question marks. Others turned their attention back to the television. Two pictures faded in behind Keith and Cathy Mosely. The first presented Rene and Keith at the Unity Studios gala. The second showed two police officers leading her from the courthouse to the jail. The difference between the two pictures astonished her—one with an evening gown and her hair long and curled, the other with a dark skirt and white blouse and her hair hanging straight. At least her face looked the same in both.

Cathy Mosley asked a series of questions about their relationship. How and where she and Keith met, what type of things they enjoyed doing together, how long they dated. Keith answered each with ease. Too much ease, really. Maybe his publicist, or his agent, warned him of the chance of someone making the connection based on her appearance with him at the gala and prepared him. But why play their relationship up as though it still existed, when it didn't?

"So where do you see your relationship going?" Cathy Mosley asked.

Keith gave a broad smile. "Well, we're expecting our first child."

Rene slid down in the chair and took several small panting breaths. We? First? How did he make a leap like that? Sure, it was his first child, as much as it was hers, but they weren't expecting it together? Well, maybe they were, but they weren't together.

The Ivory soap woman leaned across the seat and shoved a dark gray strand of hair out of her face. "Are you all right, honey?"

Rene nodded, even though she wasn't. Damn, J.S., anyway, he had to be the one who squealed. Only two people knew, and her mother wouldn't contact Keith, or even have the inclination, unless. . .well, unless she involved Jake.

"So you're looking forward to being a father, then?" Cathy Mosley asked.

Keith said, "Absolutely. I couldn't be more excited about it."

Rene fumbled at the paper in her hands while Cathy Mosley went on to discuss the trial and how it related to organized crime. She managed to get the paper flat enough to read. One sentence filled the center of the page. *How much do you want to bet it's a girl?*

Her lips parted, and she stared at the screen. Keith was now saying, "As you probably already know, Cathy, Rene was away from her family for a long time, ten years, I believe, until recently."

"But isn't it true that she took over her father's business following his death?"

"Yes, I believe she took it over under the Agite Corporation name, but only long enough to legitimize it."

The ping-pong balls stopped. The voices of the women stopped. The only thing Rene could hear was the beating of her own heart and the small thumps of her unborn child.

"How would someone go about legitimizing something so. . ." Cathy hesitated as though she needed time to search for the right word.

"Illegal?" Keith prompted.

"Yes, so illegal." Cathy let out a small laugh.

Keith returned the laugh. Rene put her hand on her stomach and squirmed in her seat. "I don't know the particulars," Keith said. "Rene didn't involve me in any of that."

"No advice?"

"What advice could I give her?"

Cathy Mosley laughed. "Well, I suppose I see your point there."

"My understanding is that Rene's father owned a number of legitimate businesses," Keith explained. "Rene kept those businesses, the legitimate ones, alive under the corporate name and dumped the others. I can't tell you how glad I am it's all over for her. I know she's spent years trying to separate herself from all of it. She's quite an amazing woman. In fact, I hope—"

"So, once Rene took over Unity Studio, you might have been considered sleeping with the boss, in a manner of speaking?"

"Took over?" Keith blinked. Not much of a blink, but enough to let the audience know Cathy hit him with an unknown fact.

"Yes, Rene Matio now owns the controlling stock in Unity Studios. Didn't you know that?"

Keith laced his hands in his lap. “No, actually, I didn’t, Cathy. My dealings have been with Edward Pance, the director of *After the Gray Fell*, a truly gifted director, I might add, contracted by Merrimont Productions, and Jake Batella, who’s the current CEO of Unity.”

Rene noticed the women staring at her again. She could imagine what they were thinking. She owned a studio. She was screwing one of the main attractions. How much more Jackie Collins could she get?

“Ah. . . Jake Batella,” Cathy said, her smile broadening. “Tell us how you feel about working with one of Rene’s former lovers, the man she supposedly went to prison to protect.”

A picture of Jake flashed up on the screen. Several women in the recreation room whistled, and one woman said, “Hey, Rene, can I have your leftovers?”

An mischievous smile spread across Keith’s lips. “At least Jake and I have something in common.”

Cathy laughed. “It doesn’t bother you? Not even a little?”

“No, not at all. Jake and I became good friends over the completion of this project, and I imagine we’ll continue to remain friends over the years to come.”

Rene held her stomach and started panting again.

“Are you sure you aren’t about to have that baby, sweetie?” the Ivory woman beside her asked.

“No,” Rene said. “I mean, yes, I’m sure.”

The woman sat back and adjusted the collar on her orange jumpsuit, but kept a wary blue eye pinned on Rene.

Rene didn’t know what to think. Everything happened too fast. First, Keith tells the world they’re in a relationship. Next, he announces they’re about to have a child. Then, he proclaims a friendship with her ex-lover. All on national television? Maybe he had to come up with something to say after Cathy Mosley started asking questions, but he didn’t need to make it sound like a happily-ever-after, having-a-child-with-the-daughter-of-a-mobster life.

Cathy Mosley continued to discuss Jake’s involvement with Unity Studio, flipping her hands as she talked. She described how Jake initiated the purchase of the studio and ran things in the background for the last year prior to his role as acting CEO.

Keith rested his elbows on the arms of the studio chair and listened until Cathy came to a stop. “I honestly don’t know about Jake’s prior involvement with Unity, but I can say he’s done a wonderful job at orchestrating the financing we needed to finish *After the Gray Fell*. In fact, I know we wouldn’t have completed the film without his assistance since we had a number of complications and needed additional capital approved in order for the production company to complete the project.”

Rene listened while Keith described the film and its general story line. What he said amounted to a nice plug, not to mention every affiliate between heaven and earth would probably rebroadcast segments, since Cathy Mosley hit him with so many questions about his involvement with her. Were they involved? As parents, yes, but the rest? She wasn’t sure. Keith had too many issues. Not that she didn’t—ex-con with a child and ties to the mob. It wasn’t exactly a pretty picture.

The show ended. Rene sat frozen in place while the women pulled their chairs closer and abandoned their ping-pong tables. They hit her with rapid-fire machine-gun questions.

“What’s North like in the sack? Is he hung?”

“You got any movie parts for prison chicks?”

“Forget that. Tell us about Batella. Who’s he with? Is he still single?”

“You always owned a movie studio?”

“Yeah, what’s that like?”

Rene tried to answer their questions with as much honesty as she could without embarrassing herself. The Warden stood in the guard booth, her hands moving across the dials on the sound equipment. Their eyes locked. No murders. But no matter how many times Rene looked at the Warden, she still had a gut feeling the woman killed people, if not by her own hands, then by the hands of others. Perhaps only in spirit, beating away at the prisoners’ minds until they didn’t have a reason to live.

The Warden’s voice crackled across the speakers. “Room check, ladies, back to your cells. The excitement’s over.”

Rene forced her face to remain expressionless as the Ivory soap woman helped her from the chair and the other women stood around her. She stared up at the Warden and let a smile come to her lips before she mouthed the word, “Thanks.” The Warden’s eyes narrowed and her

nostrils flared. Rene took hold of the Ivory soap woman's arm and, together, with the other women, they waddled off toward their respective cells, still talking about the show.

Chapter 49

Jake

Jake stood with his arms folded across his chest, staring out the front window of T-shirts and Stuff as the sun crested the mountains, painting the slick wooden floors. A prism of colors sprayed from the crystal animals on the counter. He picked up a package of incense, pulled a lighter from his pocket, and placed a small cone in the brass incense burner. Lighting it, he watched the tip glow and a curl of smoke inch its way into the air. The clock on the wall chimed 8:45 a.m. He had fifteen minutes to go.

Waiting for Virginia felt like the longest half hour of his life. He wondered if he made the right decision. Whitefish might be a short distance from L.A., but it was a long way from Cleveland. Shit. Now he sounded like something out of the *Wizard of Oz*.

He walked back to the office, pulled open a file cabinet drawer, and thumbed through the files until he came to a thick, vinyl-bound ledger. He flipped it open and ran his fingers down the neatly printed numbers. The most recent entries were large, slanted to the right, what he assumed to be Virginia's handwriting. The older entries were Rene's familiar small straight up-and-down numbers.

His right cheek twitched as his mind drifted to the trial. He still wondered who handed J.S. the tape and why. J.S. seemed to think the guy did it because he owed J.S. a favor, but that just didn't sound right. No one handed out that type of information without a reason.

At first, Jake thought it was the mob, someone other than himself and Matero, who wanted to blow a hole in the Bureau's mid-section. But then, he realized toppling the whole payout system wouldn't be to the mob's advantage, even if the price tag for FBI nonintervention went too high. Not when crushing one or two agents could persuade the rest to take a cut.

Perhaps someone higher up in the Bureau, or elsewhere in the government, wanted to clean up the corruption without hanging a nametag on it. Whatever the reason, the person had to know the consequences of such exposure—the press blitz, the investigations, the distrust.

Jake closed the ledger. Screw it. He didn't need to know the answer. Having the tape reduced Rene's sentence. That's all that mattered.

The cowbell on the front door clanked. Jake put the ledger away, stepped from the office, and smiled. "Hey."

Virginia jumped and dropped her coat. "You scared me to death. What are you doing here? Never mind. I know what you're doing here. Rene wrote to me and said you were taking over the shop. But where have you been? That was nearly six months ago. I kept wondering why you didn't, at least, make an appearance to let me know how you wanted to handle things."

"Looks like you did fine without me." Jake pointed to the office. "I was just looking over the books. Nice job."

Virginia picked up her coat and hung it on the rack behind the counter. "Thanks. I'm not very good at management. But Rene taught me a lot, and I did my best to keep things going until you showed up."

Jake leaned on the counter. "Sorry I didn't come sooner. I had some business to take care of. Still do. I'm running Unity Studios while Rene's gone. Plus, I have a couple antique stores in Utah and Wyoming to set up, but I thought. . ." He hesitated. "Well, I was wondering if you'd found anyone else, or if you'd still be interested in giving me a shot?"

"Giving you a shot?"

"I dunno. I'm not sure if I want to get involved with someone so. . ."

"Illegal?"

"Yes, illegal. Most of my life's been wrapped up in a family I never wanted to be a part of. It was one of the reasons my uncle sent me here. I want to keep my family, but I don't want involved with what they're doing."

"Ah," Jake said, stretching out the word thoughtfully. "Didn't your uncle tell you I've resigned?"

"He told me that you parceled everything out, but that doesn't mean you won't start again. You could just set up a—"

"I won't. If I'd wanted to start again, why would I only keep the antique stores when I could've easily had something bigger?"

Virginia looked at the floor. "So why did you?"

“Because I don’t want to. Everything that happened. . .well, it taught me a lot of things, but the thing it taught me the most is that I want a normal life, and I want you to be a part of that life.” Jake could see the smile hiding behind her curls. He reached out and brushed her hair aside. “So why don’t you go out with me and see where things might lead? Let me prove myself to you.”

Virginia walked to a rack of t-shirts, her smile still in place. She smoothed a few into place. “Wouldn’t it be a little unethical? You being my boss and all?”

“I could always give you the shop and let you be the boss.”

Virginia laughed. Jake loved the sound, light, like pom-pom bells.

“No,” she said. “I don’t think you’re the type to let a woman boss you around.”

“Try me. You might find out different.”

“Really?” Her eyebrows popped up.

Jake nodded. “Really.”

Virginia went back to thumbing through the rack in front of her. Jake watched her expressions, trying to figure out what she was thinking. He wanted her, and he wanted her exactly as she was, a woman who liked feeling in control of her life, a woman who didn’t want anything to do with crime, or his past.

“How about if we go out to dinner and start from there?” she said.

“You’ve got it. And, once I take care of the business. . .,” he stopped at her frown, “the legal business I need to handle with the studio and the antique shops, I’ll have all the time in the world.”

Virginia grinned. “Well, that’s good. You’re going to need it if you’re staying in Whitefish afterwards.”

“Oh, I’m staying. No doubt about that. I’ve found this person, a woman, with the most incredible brown eyes and curly auburn hair, who I’d like to get to know better, share a little time with.”

Virginia stopped fussing with the t-shirts and stepped closer, her eyes meeting his.

“Should I be jealous?”

Jake pulled her to him. His mouth covered hers. He let himself absorb the warm cocoa feeling of her arms wrapped around his neck until their lips separated. “Definitely.”

Chapter 50

Keith and Rene

Keith paced from one bumper of the rental car to the other. The sidewalk stretched beyond the prison gate and between the fencing like a long narrow cage with a thick steel door at the other end. The sky billowed with thick, flashing gray clouds. The wind slapped against his body, bringing with it the faint odor of diesel fumes from the bypass. He looked at his watch. 12:18 p.m. Rene should be out by now.

Convincing J.S. to let him come on his own wasn't difficult, but convincing Irene was like moving Mount Rushmore three inches to the left. He'd sat in her kitchen for over an hour, talking, drinking coffee, crossing his legs—first one direction, then the other—trying his best to remain calm, while Irene clicked her tongue and shook her head.

Keith understood Irene's position. "I don't want to get into a dispute between you and my daughter. I've already spent too many years without her."

"I promise I won't put you in the middle."

Irene tapped her fingers on the table and stared out the window before her eyes wandered back to him, probing, brown, lined with small crow's feet. "If she wants to see you, fine. But if she doesn't, I expect you to leave and call me right away. Do you understand?"

"I understand. I'll leave, but I have to tell you. I intend to talk with her."

Irene frowned. "Don't argue with her, at least not on the first day she's out. You have no idea what she's been through. Being around the other prisoners, well. . . it's been difficult for her. She gets. . ." Irene rubbed her cheek a moment, as though searching for the right words. "Rene feels things most people don't."

Keith could imagine. Rene seemed intuitive, open to the emotions other people put out, even his own. He didn't want to argue with Rene, just talk. Eight letters over the last two months, and every last one came back with large red letters stamped across the front: *Rejected*. He couldn't understand why she refused to write, if nothing else but to tell him to take a flying leap.

Thunder rolled across the pavement and echoed off the brick and concrete prison walls. The ground trembled. Water saturated the air, but his mouth felt dry, gritty, like he swallowed a bag of kitty litter.

Were he and Rene ever a couple? Physically, yes. But mentally and emotionally? He wasn't sure. At one point, in Montana, he thought they were, or had a chance. Even in L.A., when she showed up on his doorstep, he thought she would let him further into her life, more than just having sex with her.

Keith shook his head. Women didn't usually blow him off. In fact, most women wanted more than he was willing to give. Well, except for Andrea, but he couldn't call what happened with her a blow off. Her jealousy ended their relationship the first time, and he never intended to stay with her the second.

His "get even" tactics were childish, though. Both Jake and J.S. saw the stupidity of his move, and they were right. Andrea deserved better, and even if she didn't, doing the same thing to her that she did to him constituted playground antics.

Oh well, he couldn't change the past. All he could do was exactly what he did—talk with her, see if he could bring things together enough to finish the film and have a professional relationship with her. Friendship was out-of-the-question. Even if he wanted it, she didn't, and he couldn't say he blamed her. Not after his callous behavior.

But Rene? She didn't even blink when she walked away from him. He didn't think her decision had anything to do with jealousy. She didn't show an ounce of greenness over the two women he was with the night she came to the house.

Shit. He wished he'd paid more attention to the news. If he had, he would've asked her about the trial, or would've shown up in Ohio earlier.

A loud buzzer sounded, and he looked up. The prison door swung open, and Rene came out. Her eyes focused on the sidewalk until the second buzzer went off, and the gate folded back. Then, her eyes came up, and her feet stopped.

The bright orange jumpsuit she wore had the words *Cuyahoga County Correctional Institute* across the front. She had a small bag in her hand. Her hair hung down her back, straight, shiny. Her stomach protruded, beautiful, full of child.

Keith wanted to rush forward, kiss her, put her into the car, and make her understand how much he cared for her, for his child. But he didn't. He knew he couldn't. She needed to move at her own pace.

The wind picked up again and slapped her hair to the side. Her eyes went to the west, toward the storm, before returning to him.

He opened the car door and retrieved a dark blue windbreaker from the front seat. "Here. Your mother sent this for you to wear so you wouldn't catch cold."

Several steps forward, and she took the jacket from his hand and put it on. "Where's J.S. and my mother? They were supposed to pick me up."

"I asked them to let me come instead. They weren't thrilled about the idea, but I insisted. I hope you don't mind. I really wanted to see you. I think we should. . .well, why don't you get inside, and we can talk?"

Rene looked back to the prison. Rain started to fall, splattering the sidewalk with large dark polka dots. She wiped her cheek.

Tears? Or rain? Keith reached out and gently touched her elbow. "I won't bite. I swear."

Her gray eyes met his. Dark. Startled. She chewed at the corner of her lip.

"If you don't want to come with me, I can call your mother. She could be here in fifteen minutes or so."

"No, this is fine."

Without looking at him, she slid into the front passenger seat. He reached inside, and she jumped. Why so scared? He made certain his voice sounded gentle, reassuring. "I'm just tucking your jacket in so it won't get caught in the door."

She looked down at his hands. "Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

Keith hurried to the other side and climbed in behind the wheel. He started the car, clicked on the wipers, and pulled forward. The wipers sloshed across the windshield. The defrost put out a musty smell, and the cool air tickled his arms. Maybe if he drove around a bit she would start feeling more comfortable.

Rene shivered and tugged at her coat, pulling it tighter around her stomach. "Where are we going?"

“Wherever you want.”

She stared at the highway in front of them a moment. “Any place that serves steak.”

Keith laughed. “Steak?”

“Yeah, a big, thick, juicy steak with all the trimmings. Baked potato, salad, and lots of mushrooms. Oh, and let’s not forget the A-1.”

“I take it prison food wasn’t the best.”

“It was okay.” She looked down. “I’m not really dressed to go any place special, though. They wouldn’t let my mother bring me anything to wear home. The Warden. . .well, she didn’t like me very much. She blocked most of my mail, my visitation, whatever she could. I think. . .” She rubbed her forehead and shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. I just don’t have anything to wear since the clothes I wore when I came in don’t fit any more.”

“No problem. I booked a suite at the Sheraton, and they have room service.” He hesitated. At least he understood why his letters came back. The Warden probably refused them. But telling Rene about the hotel wasn’t smart, not as skittish as she seemed. “Or we can go somewhere else. The suite does have two bedrooms, though. I don’t want you to think I made any. . .well, assumptions. It’s just that it’s not good shopping weather, and there’s clothes for you there, some J.S. bought, some I bought since your mother told me you wouldn’t have anything to wear right away.”

Rene glanced at Keith. He’s babbling, she thought, forcing the smile from her lips. She never thought of him as nervous. Of course, she felt just as nervous. No, she felt paranoid. Being around Keith made her feel nervous, but the openness, even looking out from inside the car, made her feel swallowed. Her release counselor said she might go through a fear of open spaces, but it felt more claustrophobic, like what she’d experienced when she first went into prison. The concrete had pressed in on her like a piece of metal held in a vise, and it had taken her nearly two months to adjust to the closeness. Now, she had the same feeling outside. How ironic, she thought, as she watched the rain picked up and pour over the car in thick plastic sheets.

Keith’s hand fumbled at the wiper switch on the turn signal. “Toyota.” His voice sounded disgusted.

“I’m surprised you rented an economy car.”

Keith grimaced. "I wouldn't have, except I had a wreck before I left the airport, and this was the only kind of car the rental company had left."

"A wreck?"

His eyes met hers. She searched them for something, anything that would let her see what happened. Nothing.

"Yes." He looked away, back to the red light and the stopped traffic in front of them. "I rented a Cadillac, but I wrecked it. I thought about driving it anyway. It only had a bent fender."

Not much danger involved in that, she thought. She tapped her fingers against the coarse upholstery covering the seat. "Can I ask you something?"

He glanced at the traffic light before turning to her. "Sure."

"Have you ever had anything bad happen to you?"

Creases etched across his forehead. "I've had plenty of things—"

"No, I don't mean little things. I mean something truly terrible, something you'd never tell anyone, not in a million years."

His eyes remained on her, but his facial expression told her his thoughts were on an event, a specific event in his past he didn't want to share. "Why do you ask?"

"I just needed to know."

"Needed?" A horn honked behind them, and Keith focused on his driving again. They pulled forward, away from the light.

"Sorry, I should've said I just need to know," although she already did. His expression told her something painful happened to him. But she didn't see it, relive it with him when he thought about it, and that's all she cared about, unless he chose to share whatever it was with her.

"Yes, I have, but I'd rather not—"

"You don't have to tell me. I only wanted to know if you'd ever been in a truly bad situation in your life."

The tires made loud sucking sounds against the pavement when they came to a smooth strip of blacktop. Rene continued to watch Keith while he squinted through the windshield at the rain and traffic ahead.

Tight jeans. Snug t-shirt. Even with a jacket on, she could see his muscular frame beneath. His eyes met hers for a brief second, and a slow easy smile spread across his lips before he twisted the defrost lever, and heat struck her face.

Rene wasn't sure how she felt about him. Memories of their time in Whitefish—pool, snowmobiling, ice skating, horseback riding, all of it—stuck with her, helped make her days in prison easier, but now? She didn't get any images from him. That part was good. She wanted him to have an active part in their child's life, but she also didn't want him to think he needed to stay with her because they shared a child, or because she owned a studio.

No, the studio wouldn't bring them together. If anything, it would force them apart. But even if she wanted to get together with him, what about the booze, the coke, the women? It probably wasn't anything out of the ordinary. Not for celebrities. But they were still hard things for a relationship to weather, even a strong relationship.

"So," he said. "Are you okay in going to the hotel, or should I get on the freeway and head to your mother's house?"

Yes, which? she thought. Her mother's house was safer, but it would offer little privacy to discuss matters related to the baby. She could always call her mother later, if need be. "The hotel's fine."

The baby kicked, and she looked down, running her hand gently over her stomach. She could feel Keith's eyes on her, blue, intense, curious. She wanted to look at him, but instead, she turned away and watched the buildings as they rushed by. Her thoughts drifted back to the prison, and how the Warden stood, waiting for her to sign her paperwork and shove it through the hole in the safety glass.

"Well, I suppose you're off to run your daddy's empire now," the Warden said, her lips pressed in a hard line, her words clipped.

"There's no empire left." Rene made certain her voice remained steady. She didn't want to give the Warden the impression her hurtful words meant as much as they did. "Except yours. You still have your empire to run, don't you?"

The slight cock of the Warden's head, the narrowing of her eyes, still burned at Rene's mind. "If you want to call a prison an empire," the Warden said. "Yes, I do."

Rene wanted to say that not everyone there, not everyone in prison, killed someone, or did something hideous enough to deserve such hatred beyond punishment. She wanted to tell her how law enforcement was full of as much, if not more, corruption than anything the prison had to offer, how many payoffs she witnessed, how many things ignored, how little actual law enforcement happened when money changed hands. But she didn't. There wasn't any point. The lines were already drawn. Law. Crime. The Warden would never see the gray space resting between the two.

The car took the corner into the six-story hotel garage. Keith stopped, pushed the fat red button, and grabbed the parking ticket when it popped out of the yellow time-stamp machine. The red and white gate jerked up, and they moved forward, making two loops through the thick layers of concrete before gliding to a stop. Keith hopped out, came around the car, and helped her from the passenger seat, their hands touching for the first time. His hand felt warm, comfortable, strong enough to pull both her and the baby up.

One floor down the elevator, a short distance to the hotel lobby, and the desk clerk looked nothing less than aghast when she saw the orange jumpsuit. Blinking, the young woman said, "May I help you?"

Rene smiled and threw a thumb over her shoulder. "I'm with him."

The desk clerk's eyes widened when Keith appeared. People in the lobby crowded forward. Pens and papers came out. Keith leaned into her ear and whispered, "Here," handing her the room key. For a second, Rene felt like a groupie, standing among the women, who were now bouncing up and down with excitement. But she took the small envelope with the room number printed on the front, skirted past the crowd, and headed for the elevators. Her heart beat hard.

"Calm down," she told herself. She didn't need to make a decision today. They could talk and get to know one another again. Then she could decide if she wanted him or not. Who knew? Maybe he didn't want her any more. Maybe things changed. No, that couldn't be true. Not after what he said on *Celebrity News Flash*.

The elevator jarred to a stop at the top floor. As she slid the key into the lock and opened the door, her mind ran over the possibilities, how she might handle Keith without putting him

off or making the wrong decision. Her feet stopped once she stepped inside, though, and she felt her mouth gape.

The carpet was thick and a deep rose color. The center area was arranged like a living room with dark mahogany tables, heavy brass lamps, two overstuffed chairs and a sofa with a small floral pattern. The curtains were open. She could see the lake—gray, lapping against the storm—and the Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame to the right.

Well, she might as well get used to a few luxuries. She had money, oodles of it, and her life would be a lot different than it was during her time in Montana.

Peering around, she spotted two doors on each side of the room. One open. One closed. She walked over to the open one and saw two outfits spread across the bed. The first was a chocolate brown pants suit, the other a simple black dress. Both had matching lingerie positioned to the side.

Not bad, she thought, stepping forward and running her fingers across the fabric. Stretchy. Comfortable feeling. She wondered how Keith knew what size to purchase until she recalled the dress he bought her for gala. Not only did he have good taste, but he also had a good memory. That, or her mother told him what to buy.

Rene closed the door, pulled her jumpsuit off, and tossed it into the wastebasket beside the bed. She hoped she never had to wear another orange outfit as long as she lived, especially one that marked her as a prisoner.

She turned and surveyed herself in the full-length mirror. The white, cotton undergarments weren't the best. The belly was still there, sticking out in all of its seven-month glory, but she liked that her breasts had gotten bigger. Not that they were shabby beforehand, but now. . . whaala. . . they were huge, probably the one blessing her body bestowed upon her to make up for the rest.

A white box with a red ribbon around it, sitting on the dresser, caught her eye. She picked it up and held it a moment before pulling the ribbon off. Her eyes widened at the black lace and rayon negligee inside. A small white envelope rested on top. She frowned. The gift was more than a little presumptuous. Besides, she preferred silk, if given a choice.

Rene opened the card and smiled at the sight of J.S.'s handwriting. Did you ever stop to think there might have been another reason why you met Buddy?

She frowned. Why would J.S. ask such a question? He knew how responsible she felt for Buddy's death.

She heard the door to the suite click open and Keith's shoes moving across the carpet toward the bedroom. "Don't come inside. I'm not dressed."

Keith laughed. "I'm not. I just wondered if the clothing fit, and if you saw the box from J.S."

Rene looked at the little arrow and the word *over* on the bottom of the card. She flipped it over to see another sentence on the back. *If you haven't already figured it out, just put the thing on and show him before I come down there and smack you for being so simple-headed!* She let out a loud laugh.

Keith said from a more distant spot in the room behind the door. "If they don't fit, or you don't like them, we can always find the nearest shop and go down there after you get something to eat."

"No, no. I haven't even tried the clothing on yet. I was. . ." She hesitated. Maybe J.S. was right. If she and J.S. hadn't known Buddy, they wouldn't know Keith. Could it really be that simple? "Well, just a minute, and I'll show you."

Keith glanced at the room service menu and wondered what Rene thought so funny. Both outfits were nice enough. They should look good on her. He wondered if she realized how beautiful she was, how much she affected him, how much he wanted to touch her, feel her stomach and his child growing inside. Every time he looked at her, her eyes skidded away. He wondered what might put her at ease, make her remember the time they shared together in Montana, in Los Angeles.

If he'd just gotten his head away from himself long enough to think about why she walked out on him, why she seemed hesitant to get involved with him to begin with, he might have realized there was a reason.

As he stared at the menu, his thoughts shifted to J.S. and the house where J.S. lived before any involvement with Rene. Like most houses in the neighborhood, it had boards nailed over the windows. Keith could remember the sinking feeling in his stomach when J.S. pushed aside the front door, and they both stepped inside. Cracked ceilings, walls covered with gang markings, and floors littered with discarded foil.

J.S. said, “Home sweet home.”

Keith couldn’t help but wonder how J.S. survived. It made him understand how J.S. hooked up with someone like Phil Matio to begin with. Rene was born to it, but J.S. chose the lifestyle, and he always wondered why until he set foot inside that house.

“You know,” J.S. said on their way back to the hotel. “Buddy spent way too much time feeling sorry for himself. He didn’t take care of what mattered.”

Keith didn’t know how to respond. He never did whenever anyone discussed the fellow who supposedly looked so much like him.

“You seem smarter, though,” J.S. said. “Like maybe you won’t piss away what’s worth having. That is, if you actually manage to get it.”

“Get what?”

“You’ll figure it out.” J.S. grinned. “If you don’t, I’ll just go back to thinking you’re another stupid-ass white boy.”

“Oh, gee, thanks,” Keith said.

J.S. had slapped his leg and laughed.

Now, Keith shook his head and smiled at the thought of J.S. calling him a stupid-ass white boy. The description fit. Even if he still didn’t have the slightest idea what he was supposed to get.

Rene’s voice came from behind the bedroom door. “I’m not sure I can wear this thing J.S. bought me.”

“Doesn’t it fit?”

“No, it fits. It’s just. . .”

Rene stepped into the room, and Keith dropped the room service menu. An immediate rise bulged against the inseam of his pants. The sheer black cloth showed her belly, full, round. The lace barely hid her ample breasts. The panties came right below her belly button. Her long dark hair hung down across her shoulders in a modest Lady Godiva pose.

She tried again. “It’s just too—”

“Beautiful?”

Rene laughed. “That wasn’t what I was thinking.”

“No?”

“I was thinking it was a little too. . .well, revealing.”

Keith went over and started to touch her stomach, but stopped. His Lamaze coach told him pregnant women didn’t like people feeling their bellies without permission. “May I?”

“Well, I don’t think he’ll be happy until you do.”

“He?” Did she already know?

She stuck her belly out further. “Didn’t you say we had a bet?”

Keith smiled. “Yes, I did.” He rubbed his hand gently over her until he felt a thump. Leaning over, he kissed the spot. “It’s definitely a girl. I can tell by the kick. She’s ready to come out and let her daddy spoil her.”

Rene held her hand to the other side of her stomach. “Nope. I think it’s going to be a boy because he certainly misbehaves like his father.”

“Ah.” Keith straightened upright. He stayed far enough away to allow her a buffer, but close enough she could touch him if she wanted. “So you’ve been reading the rags.”

“Not much else going on in prison other than celebrities, smut, and television. That is, unless you count the wonderful cuisine and the beat-up ping pong tables.”

“Smut?” Keith didn’t know why he never thought of women in prison reading pornography.

“Yeah, you know—”

Keith laughed. “I know what it means. I just wondered if you—”

“Read any?” Her smile changed to one he could only describe as impish. “No, I didn’t feel the need.”

Had pregnancy deterred her sex drive? His Lamaze coach also warned him of that possibility. It didn’t matter. Sex or not, he still wanted her. Everything else could wait.

“Of course,” she said, taking a step closer. “I had my own memories to rely on.” Her fingers touched his belt.

Keith didn’t need another signal. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, deep, passionate, lingering over the taste of her mouth, the same lime and honey mixture he remembered. Her fingers tugged at the hem of his t-shirt. He yanked it off and dropped it to the floor, watching her pull the top of her negligee over her head. Her hair fluttered and fanned across her shoulders.

He wanted to kiss every part of her body, but instead, he said, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Funny time to ask,” she said.

He touched her stomach. “I mean. . .”

She smiled and grabbed his arm, bringing him to the floor with her. “I’m sure we can figure out a way.” Her fingers yanked at his belt.

He pulled his pants off. She did the same and rolled onto her other side, drawing him closer, bringing his hand to her breast. He toyed with her nipple and kissed her neck as she scooted closer, spooning her body against his own. Her skin felt soft, hot, exciting.

He nipped at her earlobe and whispered, “I can see you’ve thought about this.”

“Most definitely.” Her voice sounded throaty.

There wasn’t any doubt about what she wanted, or even how she wanted it. He shifted her legs and entered her, moving gently, slowly. His groin throbbed, wanted—no, demanded—to take her with more force, what he already knew she liked. But his mind told him to hold back, keep from hurting either her or their unborn child.

She brought her legs together. He could feel her tightness. Her hips moved in such a way, circling, grinding, passionate, that he thought he was going to climax too early. He pushed her legs apart just enough to let his hand slip between her thighs. Her breath came in short gasps as his fingers massaged her. He wanted to roll her over and bathe her with his tongue, but she was too close to reaching her own pleasure.

A second later her body shivered, and she cried out with climax, matching his own, until they both fell limp, sweaty, satisfied. He wrapped his arms around her.

Rene rolled over to face him. Her gray eyes were still dark. “Wow. Maybe I should go to prison more often.”

Keith kissed her, letting his lips travel down her neck and back to her mouth. “Not if I have anything to say about it.” No matter how much it took, or what he had to do, he wasn’t letting her walk away again.

Chapter 51

J.S.

J.S. sat in the small white Toyota and pressed his face against the glass, staring at the house beside him. Raindrops raced down the car window, squiggling their way to the small stream running to the sewer. The house needed a fresh coat of paint, but putting that aside, it looked solid enough—white siding, black shutters, a gray wooden porch, and a heavy oak door.

Irene urged him to come, said he was being just as simple-headed as Rene if he didn't. Looking at the black, spray-painted bicycle propped against the porch railing, he wondered if he made the right decision.

He hadn't seen Betty since 1975—a year after Buddy died—when he walked out of the Pic-n-Save and gave her a shout. She scurried off, dragging her groceries into the front seat with her, and sped away as fast as she could. He couldn't blame her. The drugs, the alcohol, the thieving—he and Rene were both in the same barrel. It took them two years to push the lid off, and another two before they climbed out altogether, with him going to prison, and her to Whitefish.

The private investigator he hired in Montana told him the facts: where Betty lived, when her marriage ended, and how many children she had. Irene confirmed the information later, shortly after Rene returned to Ohio. But what they gave him only amounted to letters and numbers. Nothing an old wino couldn't cough out of a bottle of Thunderbird. Neither told him if she'd found another man, or gave a fiddy-do about talking to an ex-con like himself.

Every time he pulled Betty's telephone number from his wallet and looked at it, he started to call. But his mind pulled a Tasty Freeze on him, and his finger froze on the first button, like he pressed it on an icy electric pole.

He should've gotten his scrawny butt to Ohio the minute his year passed and the courts gave him permission to return. But excuses kept popping into his head. Helping Rene and Keith landed on top. If it wasn't for Rene, his sorry excuse for a self would still be behind bars. He owed her, even if she didn't expect diddly from him. Keith? Well, if it wasn't for Keith, J.S. knew he wouldn't amount to anything—no job, no money in his pocket, no future. And

watching Keith flounder around like a carp tossed in the dirt was enough to scare anybody away from the booze, keep their head straight, away from another trip down the rabbit hole.

J.S. laughed when he remembered all of the white rabbit thoughts he had the day he hired the private investigator. But everything was fine. No more excuses. Everybody was doing what they were supposed to be doing, and it was time to take care of himself—drop a coin in the slot, pull the lever, and see what came up.

Taking a deep breath, he straightened his shirt and made sure his collar was in place. Mrs. Bumbe told him the way a man dressed showed a woman whether he had merit or not. She was right. The white cotton shirts and black pants she picked out for him put off an air of respectability, what he needed when it came to Betty.

One quick look in the mirror, fingers through the hair, and he climbed from the car. A dozen long strides put him on the porch. He stood there a moment, staring at the small buzzer beside the door, before he pushed it. A brash dong echoed inside the house, and a little boy appeared. The boy looked him over through soft, dark brown eyes.

J.S. cleared his throat. “Is your mother home?”

The boy rubbed at the short nap on his head before hollering, “Momma! A strange man’s at the door looking for you.”

Betty appeared. She was a little heavier than the last time he saw her. But her face was still the same smooth milk chocolate, and her curves just as full and luscious as he remembered.

She adjusted the hem on her bright pink shirt and tilted her head. “Yes?”

“I don’t know if you remember me.”

“J.S.? Is that you?”

A smile spread across his lips. “Yeah, it’s me.”

At first, she hesitated, but then she said, “Well, come on in. It’s wet out there. What have you been doing with yourself anyway? I always wondered where you went. I heard you wound up in prison. Is that true? What in heaven’s name happened?”

J.S. stepped through the door and took a deep breath. Her house smelled like slow-roasted beef. The furniture looked old, but well-kept. A tapestry rug covered the center of the

polished oak floor. The boy he just met and a smaller girl with tight cornrows, beaded at the ends, stared at him with wide cocoa brown eyes.

Betty hugged him against her chest before shoving him to the end of her arms and running her eyes over his full six-feet, two-inches. “You look good, J.S., real good.”

“So do you, Betty. Like a picture from my past.”

A dark shade of pink rose to her cheeks. “Oh, don’t be silly.”

“I’m not. You’re as beautiful as ever.”

She tugged at his arm, pulling him across the room. “We were about to have dinner, and it’s been awhile since I’ve had a gentleman over, so I hope you’ll stay. I really want to hear about what’s been going on in your life, how you’ve been, where you’re living, why I haven’t seen you running around Cleveland.”

J.S. laughed and took a seat on the thick cushioned sofa. Betty settled in beside him. The children plopped on the rug and folded their legs, ready to listen to whatever he had to say. Betty put her hand in his. It felt warm, soft, good—just the way he imagined.

Chapter 52

Rene

“I’ve gotta push!” Rene struggled to bring herself upright in the hospital bed.

“No, no, don’t push yet.” Keith grabbed her hand and eased her back against the pillow.

“Pant. Here, like this.” He let out short bursts of air. “Heh, heh, heh.”

Rene matched him. Her Lamaze coach instructed her to pant, but the pain ripping at her gut told her to push, push, push—shove that watermelon out. She took a deep breath as the contraction started to subside. Her body fell limp.

Thank heavens, she thought. “How do you know Lamaze?”

“I took a private class in Los Angeles.” His voice sounded calm, matter-of-fact. He leaned over the sink, dampened a washcloth, wrung it out, and wiped her forehead. His green scrubs were damp with sweat around the neck.

Rene took the cool rag from him and rubbed it against her face. “You did?”

His blue eyes met hers. “Yes, why wouldn’t I?”

“I dunno.” She didn’t think he’d plan so far ahead for the birth. In fact, she didn’t expect him there at all. But if he came, she figured he would sit in the waiting room, like most of the chicken-shit fathers.

Rene winced as another contraction overtook her body. “Oh! I wish I could get this over with.”

Keith put his hand in hers. “Squeeze, Rene. Squeeze it hard.”

“You’re gonna regret saying that, North.”

Her fingers tightened around his until they numbed and took her mind away from the knives jabbing at her abdomen. The room spun, soft pastels and floral pictures, blurring and whirling, a high-powered merry-go-round. Baby powder and anesthetic mixed with her sweat. Soft lights above her head glared against her widened pupils.

The pain stopped, and Rene let go of Keith’s fingers. “It’s over.”

Keith flapped the hand she released and rubbed both hands together. “Boy, you’ve got one heck of a grip.”

Rene laughed. “I warned you.”

Keith returned her laugh. “It’s nothing compared to what you’re going through.” His lips touched her forehead. “You can squeeze as hard as you like. I can take it.”

“How about birthing this kid for me, instead?”

“I would if I could.”

“That’s what you say now. But I bet if they put this bowling ball inside of you, made you carry it around for nine months, and told you to push it out, you’d run for the first exit.”

Keith grinned. “You’re probably right. Men aren’t made for pain. Women are much stronger. It’s probably why they gave you the job and just passed the fingers off to me.”

“Crap!”

Her hand reached for his. He let her have it, placed his other hand over top, and helped her squeeze. Her mind clouded with each passing contraction until she lost track of time. People came in and out. The nurse, the midwife, her mother, J.S., her adoptive sister, Catherine, and even Betty—who she wasn’t used to having around again, but was still glad to see. Each of them encouraged her until the next lash hit, and she reached for her stomach.

Keith appeared at her side. “Pant, Rene, pant. You’re doing great.” He draped a cool washcloth across her forehead and put his hand in hers. “They’re getting closer together.”

“No kidding. You wanna tell me something I don’t already know?”

Keith laughed.

Rene tried to pull herself upright.

“No, not yet.” Keith squeezed her hand. “Just grip. Break my hand if you have to.”

She crushed his hand with her fingers, and they both panted until the contraction passed. “I have to roll over.”

Keith helped her onto her hands and knees and rubbed her back. She needed some relief from the pain throbbing down her back to her kidneys. Her fingers toyed with the small flat rock she found swimming in Whitefish Lake. It felt smooth against her palm. She tried to think about the clear water, the mountains, the evergreen scent in the air, everything she loved about Montana and how it erased the bad part of her life, until the nurse came in and said, “Flip over.”

Keith hugged her against his body as she rolled and positioned on her back.

The nurse pushed her thighs apart. “Looks like we’re about ready.”

We, my ass, Rene thought. "Help me up."

Keith grabbed her elbow and eased her from the bed so she could pace. Another contraction hit, doubling her with pain. She clutched at his hand, and he looped his arm under her armpits.

"You can do it, Rene," he said. "I love you. You know that, don't you?"

"I doubt you would be saying that, North, if you had the slightest idea what I'm thinking right about now."

Keith laughed. "Oh, yeah?"

"Ever hear of gelding?"

His hand went to his groin. "I thought you might think that, so I came prepared with a sport cup."

Rene returned his laugh. "Trust me. I could still do it."

"I'll bet you could." Keith helped her back into the bed. "But I'm not giving you the chance. I'm the guy with the strong hands, remember?"

She rolled, first one side, then the other, then onto her back. Surely, there must be some position she could lay to ease the pain.

Keith massaged her shoulders and told her to pant every time a contraction hit. She looked at him. He smiled, produced another washcloth, and wiped the sweat from her forehead. She knew she loved him. She wasn't sure if she wanted to love him. Maybe it was just the moment.

No, she needed to stop kidding herself. The moment wasn't now. The first time they kissed. The very second he pinned her against the side of the swimming pool, and their lips met, she fell in love with him. Everything afterwards, everything they did together, every kiss they shared, built from that moment.

She would've been okay if he hadn't come to Ohio, hadn't even known or cared about the baby. The baby was hers no matter what. No, crap! That wasn't true, either. She needed to quit feeling so afraid. The baby belonged to both of them. Regardless of her insecurities, her resistance to love, her fear about feeling responsible for someone else, for another man. Keith could carry the weight. He was ready for fatherhood, worthy of her love. She had to forget about the past, get on with her life, and just let Keith love her.

Her hand grabbed the sheet. “Another one.”

“Almost there,” Keith said. “You remember we have a bet, don’t you?”

“What the . . .?” she blurted out.

“Remember? I bet you that we’d have a girl.”

Oh, she thought. He was trying to focus her on something else. “And if we don’t?”

“I’ll love him anyway.”

Crap, crap, crap. Why weren’t there any spaces inbetween? Where’s the nurse? To heck with the nurse. Where’s the midwife?

Keith brought his hand to her face and caressed her cheek. “Well, how about if it’s a girl, you marry me?”

“No.” Even through the blur, she saw the pinched, hurt look on his face. She was in too much pain to explain. Darn him, anyway. “We’re not ready to get married. We need to—” The pain cut off her thoughts, her words, everything but finishing the job her body told her to do.

Keith pushed her hair away from her forehead. “Will you at least live with me, if it’s a girl?”

That sounded better. They needed to share a little more time together, get to know one another more, figure out if marriage was right. “Okay, and if it’s a boy—”

The midwife walked in and pushed her legs apart. “We’re ready. The next time a contraction hits, give a good push.”

Thank heavens. The pain came. Rene grabbed the bed railings and heaved her body forward until she thought the blood vessels in her forehead were going to explode.

“Relax,” the midwife said.

Keith kissed her, their sweat mingling. His eyes drifted to the monitor and the small arched peaks of her and the baby’s heartbeats blooming in rhythm, together, yet separate. “And if it’s a boy?”

A weak smile came to her lips. “If it’s a boy, you have to live with me wherever I want.”

She felt another contraction coming. No, she commanded herself. Not yet. She needed to see his reaction. Hurry up! She already knew she was having a boy. The ultrasound told her. It was a dirty trick to pull on him, but she had to know if he was serious about wanting a family

above all else. She didn't care where they lived. Cleveland, Whitefish, Los Angeles. It didn't matter.

Keith looked away from the monitor. Sweat poured down his forehead. His blonde hair was dark, a light shade of brown. "I would live with you in hell, if that's what you wanted."

Sweet, Jesus! She felt the head crowning.

"Push, Rene, push hard!" the midwife said. "This is it!"

Exhausted, Rene struggled forward, fighting to pull herself up. Keith wrapped his arm around her shoulders, brought her forward, and together, they shoved. Soon, James Phillip North made his way into the world with a loud cry from both parents.

Chapter 53

Rene

“James Phillip. You named him after me, didn’t you?” J.S. bubbled with excitement. “Me and Phil. I know you did. Let me hold him, will you?”

Rene handed him the baby and made a shushing sound with her lips. The warning wasn’t for the baby’s sake. He was awake, his little eyes wide, and his body wiggling. But his father was asleep, his eyes screwed shut, and his body drooping over the side of the chair.

“Yes,” Rene whispered. “James is named after you.”

J.S. cradled the baby in his arms and gently pushed the receiving blanket away. “He’s beautiful.”

“So, tell me. What’s up with you and Betty?”

J.S. grinned. “Don’t know, but I’m sticking around to find out.”

A sound came from the corner. Keith sat up, yawned, stretched, and adjusted his faded blue t-shirt. “Sorry, I must’ve fallen asleep.”

“No kidding,” Rene said. “I almost called the mortuary.”

Keith laughed. “What do you think, J.S.? Isn’t he great? I’ve never seen anything so tiny in my life, but he sure is active.”

“He isn’t tiny.” J.S. stuck a finger to the baby’s lips. “He’s just right. Never thought you’d pull your act together, but you did, and you did good, bro.”

Keith ran his hand through his hair. “Sometimes you just have to smack me a little.”

Rene watched the three of them and thought about how things changed. She might not be over Buddy, but she understood the feelings she had for him, later, gave her a man who resembled Buddy, but was his own person, not a memory. They also gave her a friend, a brother, who shared the same hell she did, but who also managed to start over in his own way. And they gave her a baby. One that looked like a blend of her and Keith with the names of the only true friend and father she ever had. She knew her mother would join in their lives, and she had a feeling Betty might join in as well. The world felt warm, safe.

Reaching behind her, she fluffed the pillow and started to lean back, but her head shot toward the door, and pictures slammed through her mind. Aide. Cart. Baby. “Quick, hand me the baby.”

“Wait, I wanna—”

“I said, hand me the baby!”

J.S. placed the baby in her arms and stepped back as an aide pushed the crib cart into the room and stumbled. The cart sailed forward, clattering against the bottom of the bed and striking J.S. hard against the side. He took several steps, tripped, and fell into Keith’s lap. The chair tipped. They both hit the floor with a loud thud and a pair of “umphs.”

The aide rushed forward, pulling the cart back, with a stunned apologetic look on her face. “I’m so sorry. Are you all right? Is everyone all right?”

Rene looked at the baby. His eyes were wide, and he had a finger shoved against his lips, but he didn’t seem upset. It was as though he knew his mother would take care of him, no matter what. “Well, little guy, welcome to my world. Looks like momma’s gonna keep you nice and safe.”

“Get off me,” Keith said.

J.S. untangled himself from Keith, got up, and brushed off. “Well, I’ll be.”

Keith looked at her from the floor, his eyebrows knotted. “How did you know that was going to happen?”

J.S. laughed and shook his head. “Don’t ask, bro. Just don’t ask.”

Rene smiled. She felt as though she’d finally found the last piece of the puzzle. A purpose for the horrible things she saw, or things she could see, if she just let herself see them.