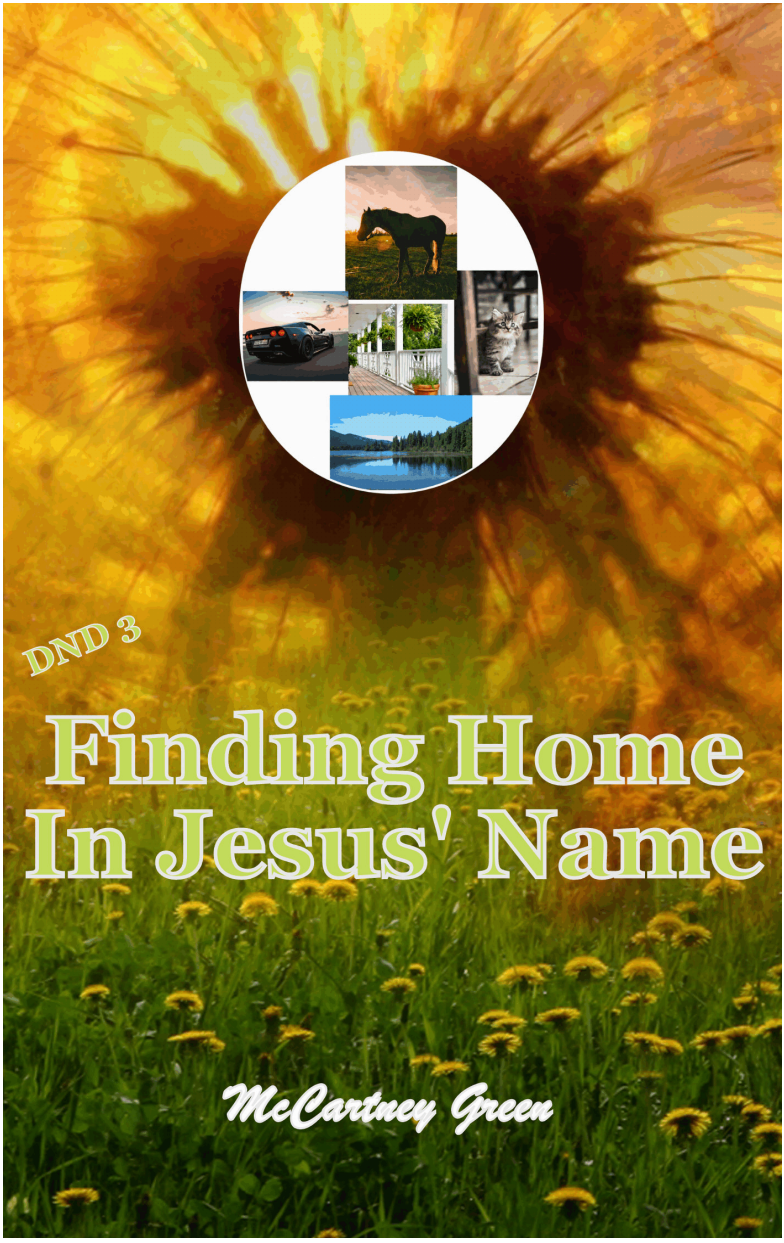

DND 3
Finding Home
In Jesus' Name
McCartney Green

DND #3

Finding Home-In Jesus' Name

McCartney Green

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I'm supposed to say that, but really, share, share, share. You may share this work in its entirety to any and all.

This is a work of fiction, or is it? Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are *used fictitiously*, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is either unintentional or a very cool synchronicity!

For my children, my teachers in all things.

Keeping Tabs

If you've read the first two books in the *DND In Jesus' Name* series, *A Healing*, and *Suffer the Children*, then you will be interested to know that Chapter 1 goes into the past by 25 yrs and 9 months, and then beginning in *Finding Home* Chapter **2**, it is May and:

Eric Kino is about to be 49 in June

Shelley Adams Kino is 43

Ricky Kino just turned 30 in May

Breanna Adams is 26 and will be 27 in August

Mark Adams is 17

Joey Adams is 15

June Flower Kino (Jeffy) turned 7 in March

Justin Lee is now 45

Jason Lee is 36

Angel Pritchard Lee is 34

Kimberly (Kimmie) Lee turned 5 in February

Toby Nash (Smith) is about to be 33

Caroline Jones Smith is about to be 31

Gracie Smith turned 3 in March

“The wicked are overthrown and are no more,
But the house of the righteous will stand.”
Proverbs 12:7

“Out of the dreariness,
Into its cheeriness,
Come we in weariness,
Home.”

~ Stephen Chalmers~

Chapter 1

Lewis Home, Pine Forest, Georgia

"Pregnant? Oh, my, pregnant," Madeline Lewis declared softly.

Louise Lewis watched her mother as the news she'd just delivered registered. It took her mother only a few seconds to launch into her "perfect mom" routine– a routine Louise hated.

"Oh, dear, Louise, hon." Her mother reached for her, took her by the shoulders, smiled kindly. "Everything's gonna be all right, dear, just you wait and see. Oh, sweetheart, how are you feeling? Do you know how far along you are? Goodness, that's okay, we'll figure it all out." Madeline Lewis put her arms around her only child. "Don't you worry about a thing now, my little LuLu. Your father and I, we're here for you. We'll all get through this together."

Louise shook her head. Her mother's sweetness grated on her nerves. Always had. Now she was finally gonna do something about it. She was gonna get the heck outta Dodge. She pulled away from her mother's hug. "No, Mom, we won't all get through this together. I'm the one that's pregnant."

"Who's the father? Does he know what he's done?"

The question came from her father and Louise rolled her eyes before she answered. "What *we* did, Dad. *We*. It's not like he forced himself on me."

"Well, does he know?"

"Yes, Dad, he knows. He wants to marry me and spend the rest of his life trying to make me and his child happy," Louise said, her voice laced with sarcasm.

"Oh, thank goodness," her mother sighed.

Louise glared at her. "I'm not gonna marry him, Mom. I'm not gonna marry anyone."

Madeline winced. "But Louise, honey, don't you think it would be the best for you and the baby?"

"No, I don't. I mean, look at the two of you. Do you think I want to live your life?"

"There's nothing wrong with our lives, Lulu. There's nothing

wrong with being honest, hard-working folks," her father argued.

"Yeah, honest, hard-working people who live in an old, rickety house, in an old, hick town and have nothing more to do on a Friday night but sit on the porch and shell peas. I hate this place."

"You're only sixteen, Louise. You don't know what you want yet," her father put in.

"That's where you're wrong, Dad. I do know what I want. I want to get away from here. Away from this house, from this town, from this whole freakin' state."

He frowned. "Don't you think that would be impossible now, in your condition? Realistically speaking, you're pregnant, but you're gonna have to work in order to eat and to afford a place to live. This is an impossible situation for you without help from us."

"Just watch me."

"Lulu, my sweet girl, what are you saying?" Madeline cried.

"Let me see if I can spell it out for you, Mom. I'm gonna have a baby. I'm not gonna marry the father and I am leaving here."

"Oh, Lawrence, we messed up. Did we forget to teach her about family and about love? Where did we go wrong?"

Lawrence only shook his head, because he was at a loss.

Madeline turned back to Louise. "But where will you go? Please, baby, you just have to listen to reason. Your father and I, we love you. We want to take care of you. Let us help you."

Her father took her by the shoulders and forced her to look up into his face. "Why now, Louise? If you wanted to leave us, why now, when you're pregnant and life is about to get tough? At least wait until after the baby is born."

"Are you kidding me? How dumb can you be, Dad? Look, this pregnancy is just something that happened, but I can deal with it."

Her mother put her hands to her heart. "Oh, Lulu, don't tell me you plan to..."

"What? Have an abortion? No, I'm not. I've decided to keep the kid. I've always wanted something that was mine. Only mine. And now, I have it and you can't take that away."

"Honey, a baby is not a possession. It's a real person. A little person that needs to be fed and loved and cared for."

"I'm completely capable of taking care of myself and my baby."

"What did we do, Lulu, to have you hate us so much?"

"Don't start, Mom. I didn't say I hate you. I just need to get away.

I'm suffocating. I need to get out of this hick town. The only things that thrive in middle Georgia are the mosquitoes. When I went to Atlanta for that student conference and people asked me where I'm from, no one had even heard of *Pine Forest*. I have to get away. Do you realize we don't even have a movie theater? We have two grocery stores, a gas station, a *Dairy Queen* and a *Family Dollar*."

"First of all, you're exaggerating, and secondly, can't you wait?" her father asked. "Look, I understand, baby girl, that you're feeling a little oppressed. I understand your need to get out and experience the world, but can't you wait, just until this baby is born and you graduate from high school and maybe until..."

"Stop. I'm not waiting another year and a half, Dad. I'm not waiting another week and a half. I'm outta here."

"But Lulu, honey," her mother cried, "school is about to start. It's your junior year. There are so many exciting things to do. You'll get to go to Prom and..."

"And what, Mom? Go to prom in a designer maternity gown?"

"Oh, honey, we can work this all out. Please."

Louise hardened her heart against her mother's pleas and her father's look of exasperation. She wanted out. She had come to hate the picture of perfect homey bliss they presented to her. As far as she was concerned, that picture had bars. She hated everything to do with her home, her town, her school, her friends. She even hated her own name. Louise Lewis. Who would name their child Louise in this day and age? So, she was named for her mother's dead sister. So what? How selfish was that to make their own daughter suffer with such a horrible name? And to add insult to injury she looked just like her mother, a tiny, petite woman with a turned-up nose and honey blond hair. They looked like mother-daughter elves. Ugh!

Louise hardened her heart against the tears on her mother's face. She didn't want to think about that. She wanted to think only of herself and that is exactly what she intended to do.

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Ephesians 6:1-3

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

Chapter 2

May 15th Twenty-five years and nine months later...
Golden Hotels Central Office, Los Angeles, California

"Sort of looks like a glowing red sun from up here, doesn't it?" Glen said softly, kissing the nape of Lisa's neck and wrapping his arms snugly around her waist.

Lisa smiled and leaned her head back against his shoulder. They were practically the same height so they stood cheek to cheek, gazing out of the window of her new corner office. The "glowing red sun" he was speaking about was actually her brand new candy-apple-red Corvette, a birthday present from her mother. "It really does seem as if it's glowing," Lisa replied.

Glen turned her around. "It's glowing because it's in love with its new owner. I can understand that because I am too." His lips met hers, demanding and forceful.

Lisa wriggled free. "Not here, Glen."

Not a bit deterred, he pulled her toward him. "Why not?" he murmured. "You're the new senior vice president. That makes you boss, except your mother, of course. You can do what you want." He grabbed at the hem of her skirt. "Come on, babe, we can close the door and initiate your new desk."

"Glen Truett, you stop," she demanded, struggling to pull away. "We are not gonna do anything here in my new office."

"You are such a prude," he said, his eyes narrowing.

She hated that she sounded like a prude, but she always walked a thin line where her mother was concerned, and she really couldn't afford to take a chance that Lou would walk in and catch them doing anything other than work. She pulled back and he finally let her go.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself. You can't blame a man for trying though, especially when the babe is as hot as you. Forgive me?"

She smiled. "Since you put it that way, how could I not?"

His gaze swept their surroundings. "Pretty great digs, huh? Just think, to be only twenty-five years old and senior vice president of your very own company. You know, I really wanted that position. Guess it

helps to have your mom as the owner, president and CEO."

Lisa frowned. "Are you saying you think Lou made it easy on me because I'm her daughter?"

He shrugged. "Well, that is the consensus."

Her eyes narrowed. "You of all people should know that Lou doesn't make things easy on anyone, and especially not on me."

"Don't go getting your temper up, Lisa. Just calm down."

"Don't you tell me to calm down. If anything she's been harder on me. She made me start at the bottom, doing laundry, cleaning rooms, changing beds. I don't recall you having to change any beds."

"Ever climb into one of those beds?" Glen asked, raising his eyebrows suggestively.

Lisa blew out a breath. "Don't think that I don't realize you just tried to change the subject and that's a fine thing to be asking your future wife."

"Just fantasizing," he murmured as he kissed her softly.

"Sometimes I believe that's all you think about," Lisa said.

"It's hard not to when the woman I'm gonna marry looks like you. You have to know, you're gorgeous, Lisa. But we need to fix one thing." He reached up and pulled the clip from the back of her hair. Tons of springy red curls tumbled free down her back.

"Look what you've done. Do you know how hard it is to get all that hair put neatly up in that clip?"

"Then leave it down. It gets to me."

"You're incorrigible."

He pounded his chest. "Yes, I am."

She laughed. He could make her so angry and then turn around and make her laugh the next second. He was a handsome man. Very GQ. He was only five foot ten, just three inches taller than herself, but he didn't let that get in the way of his ego. His charcoal gray suit was magnificently tailored, the white silk shirt understated and the tie a bright splash of color. His thick black hair was perfectly styled to fall roguishly over one eye and diamonds sparkled at his cuffs and on his wristwatch. Lisa shook her head at him and circled around to sit at her new desk. "Well, I have a few million things to accomplish before I leave today, so let me get to it."

"So, I guess there's no way I can talk you into taking off half a day? After all, it is May fifteenth. I think the birthday girl deserves a long hot bubble bath and some very private alone time with her fiancé."

"There's no way. Lou asked for a preliminary quarter report and on top of that brought me piles of work, proposals to consider, profit and loss calcs for the southern region, position manuals to go over. It's as if she's testing me. Will I make it or will I break? I'll tell you this, I don't intend to break."

Glen frowned. "So, I guess that's a 'no'?"

She chuckled. "Very good. No one ever said you didn't have brains." She frowned, sighed. "Look, honey, I really am swamped, but I promise, tonight, after the big birthday bash, I'm all yours."

He leaned across the desk, hooked a finger in the V of her blouse. "I'm gonna hold you to that."

She leaned forward and kissed him. "You do that."

He straightened. "Well, then, since I can't talk you into coming with me, I'm heading out to grab some lunch and take care of some on-site problems. Soo, what time do you think you'll make it back to the penthouse?"

She tapped her finger against her bottom lip. "I suppose I'll make it home by six."

"Okay, but no later than that. Lou won't like it if we're late to your own birthday dinner."

"All Lou cares about is how she looks in front of her board and how her daughter performs in front of that same board."

"Then if I were you, I wouldn't be late. This isn't just a personal birthday party. It's a welcome to the new senior vice president of *Golden Hotels*."

"Don't worry, Glen, I won't make her mad at us. I know that's what you're concerned about."

He leaned over the desk, grabbed her by the hair, and kissed her, not very delicately. She winced and tried to untangle his fingers from her hair.

"Glen, will you please stop being so rough," she snapped when he finally let go.

"Sorry, darling, get used to it. I'm a man, and men play rough. Besides, it didn't bother you when we first met."

"You didn't actually hurt me when we first met. Now go away. I have work to do."

He leaned over and kissed her gently. "There. All better. Love you, darling," he whispered.

She smiled. "Love you too."

"I don't pay you two to hang around making eyes at each other."

"Lou," Glen said, startled by his boss's sudden appearance. "Uh, we were just saying goodbye. What are you doing here? I thought you said you were taking some personal time."

"I am. Very soon. First I came by to see my daughter." She hitched a thumb over her shoulder. "You. Out."

Glen saluted at Louise. "Yes, ma'am. See ya, Lees." He blew her a kiss as he left.

Lou eyed her daughter. "So, how's the new position fit? You've got some pretty big shoes to fill, not that I'm gonna miss that stuffed shirt. Glad he's the last of the old regime to go. Gotta hand it to the Kinos taking down the Cranes, but remind me to never cross them. How lucky are we that we were able to force the takeover when the Crane brothers went off the deep end?"

"Well, I wouldn't call it luck and to answer your first question, the position fits just fine. I'm confident I'll be very effective as your vice president."

Lou nodded. "Good. Don't disappoint me." She moved toward the window and gazed out toward the Los Angeles skyline. "I'm taking off for the afternoon. I'll expect those reports on my desk first thing Monday morning. Without fail."

"They'll be there. So, where are you off to?"

Her mother shrugged. "I needed some time for myself. I have a massage at one. Then I think I'll get a pedicure and pick up something elegant to wear to the dinner tonight."

"Sounds great. Wish I could go with you."

"This is my alone time, Lisa. You know how I feel about having time just for me."

Lisa smiled stiffly. "Yes, I know. I wasn't serious anyway. I just thought, you know, with it being my birthday and all– oh, never mind. Have a grand time, okay?"

"Do I detect a note of sarcasm?"

"Sarcasm, Mother? From me? Never."

Lou turned abruptly toward the door. "Don't be late tonight and don't call me 'mother.'"

Lisa frowned as she watched her mother make her exit. Louise Lewis was a tiny woman. A tiny woman with a huge demeanor. No one who knew her had any desire to cross her, especially not her own daughter. She knew Lou's capabilities. The woman was cold and

ruthless. Lisa gave her grudging respect for making her way to the top alone and with a child to raise, but mother and daughter were as different as night and day, both physically and temperamentally, and that suited Lisa just fine.

Lou was petite, Lisa five foot seven. Lou had short blond hair styled in a sleek pageboy. Lisa purposely grew her bright red hair out to impossible lengths, a slight rebellion on her part, since Lou hated her long hair. Her mother would be forty-two this year but looked like she was twenty-five, Lisa's own age. Lou's heart was as hard as a rock. Lisa was, well, she hoped she didn't come across like her mother. She believed she could do a good job and be respectful of others at the same time. Lou, on the other hand, had no respect for anyone, especially not her daughter, and the pitiful thing was, at twenty-five years of age, Lisa was still trying to earn it.

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Lisa pushed back from her desk, rubbing the back of her neck. The tinge of a headache that had come rolling in about the same time as her mother two hours ago was now a raging locomotive. She leaned back and the light blinded her. "Ugh, this is a bad one."

She hit the intercom. "Jodi, will you come in here a minute?"

Within seconds, her newly assigned assistant appeared at her door. She was tiny compared to Lisa. Five-foot-two at the most, Lisa surmised. Ultra slim, with the long, straight, black hair and almond eyes of her Asian ancestry.

"Yes, ma'am?"

Lisa frowned, waved her in. "Come in and please don't call me ma'am. After all, we're the same age."

Jodi smiled. "Yes, and you are the senior vice president not to mention the boss's daughter."

"Why does everyone keep reminding me of those two things? It's not as if I could forget, even though sometimes I think I'd like to." She grinned up at Jodi whose face reflected the fact that she had no idea what to say to that. "What's your last name, Jodi?"

"Appel, and yes, like the fruit but the 'e' and 'l' are reversed."

Lisa smiled kindly. "Come sit down, Jodi Appel. I want to talk to you. First, please call me Lisa. We're gonna be working together closely and hopefully for a long time so, no formalities, okay?"

Jodi nodded, obviously still a little unsure.

"Look, I'm not my mother's daughter, if that's what you're

worried about. I like to think that I'm nothing like her. I'm my own person. I'm good at what I do. And from what I've heard, you are too, so, I'm hoping you and I will become friends." She held her hand out to Jodi. "Deal?"

Jodi smiled, shook Lisa's hand. "Deal."

"Good. Now, the other thing I wanted to say is, I've got a killer headache and if I don't go home and take care of it I will be no good to anyone at the big birthday dinner slash board meeting tonight. Would it be possible to get you to print up this report for me? Just go into the second quarter, add some graphs to the numbers, put in some nice color and print it up. I will be eternally grateful."

"I thought you knew that I would do those types of things for you anyway. You don't have to ask. That's what I'm here for."

"Well, then, isn't that wonderful? No, I didn't know. I'm used to doing everything on my own. That's Lou's usual directive." She winced, placing her fingers on her temples.

"Bad one, huh?" Jodi asked, sympathy in her voice.

"Very bad."

"Migraine?"

"I'm not sure. I don't think I've ever had a migraine."

"Well, then, it's probably not a migraine. I'd say it's stress. Here, let me help." She circled around and began to massage the back of Lisa's neck and shoulders.

"Lord, that feels good," Lisa moaned.

"Go home, take an anti-inflammatory–not aspirin, turn off all the lights and lie flat in a shallow tub of very hot water. Flat, like your head resting on the bottom of the tub. Get out before the water cools and go straight to bed. An hour later you'll be good as new." She circled around and took Lisa's hand. "Here, one more thing."

Lisa looked up at her suspiciously.

Jodi laughed. "Don't worry, I'm not weird. My husband is a healer, a martial artist and a physical therapist and into all the natural healing sort of things. He's taught me a few tricks." Jodi began to pinch the part of Lisa's hand between thumb and forefinger.

"Ow, that hurts," Lisa complained.

"Yeah, that means the muscles in your neck area are tight and tensed. This little massage will actually help to loosen those stiff muscles and send a message to your brain to relax that part of you." She continued to massage Lisa's hand for several minutes.

Lisa finally looked up smiling. "I think it's easing off. Jodi, I owe you big time."

"Glad I could help, but the headache will probably come back before you get home, but the bath will fix you right up." She let go of Lisa's hand. "So, have a great time tonight at the birthday slash board meeting. I'll see you Monday. And by the way, happy birthday."

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The elevator ride up to the penthouse seemed to take forever. All she wanted to do was get into that hot tub, close her eyes and make the pain go away. The moment she walked through the door she began to relax. The penthouse was dark, the air cool. Lisa dumped her purse and keys on the sofa as she passed, thinking briefly of how her mother would disapprove. Shoes were kicked off in the hall. She was slipping out of her suit jacket and opening the door to her bedroom when time came to an abrupt halt.

There was a loud rushing sound in her brain, like a strong wind had suddenly come up and then slowly diminished. It took a moment or two for her mind to start functioning again, and as it did she began to notice small things. A pair of black strappy heels on the floor. A man's tailored white shirt lying over the edge of the bed. Painted red toenails. A slender ankle. A sleek calf curled over a hairy thigh. Different body parts, and finally two pairs of eyes staring at her with irritation, as if she was the one in the wrong place.

"What are you doing home?" her fiancé demanded.

"Are you kidding me?" Lisa shrieked. "What are *you* doing here would be the question. And let me direct that question to you too, Mo-ther." The last word was enunciated very slowly.

Lou laughed softly. "I would think that would be obvious, even to you, daugh-ter." She gave the word 'daughter' the same treatment.

"I don't believe this! I CAN'T believe this!" Lisa screamed.

"Oh, Lisa, get a grip," Lou said, impatiently. "You're always so ready to explode. I swear it's that horrible red hair."

"Get a grip? Get a grip? How can you say that?"

"Easily. This is business."

"Business? What kind of business could this possibly be?"

"The kind of business that happens every day in the corporate world. This is a business deal, Lisa. Do I need to explain further?"

"Yeah. Explain to me how you came to be a common whore."

"Hey, watch your mouth. You don't talk to Lou like that."

Lisa turned toward Glen, incredulous. "You're defending her? Her? You'd better start defending yourself, you—you..." Instead of finishing, she lunged at him.

Lou managed to scramble out of the way. Lisa got in one good punch to Glen's nose before he was able to wrestle her down and pin her to the bed.

"Let me go!" she screamed. "Take your hands off me. Now!"

He straddled her. "Be still," he growled. "You need to get control of yourself, right now."

Realizing there was no way she could get free, she stopped struggling. Took a deep breath. Glared up at him. "Okay. Okay. Now let me go."

The moment he let her go she rolled over and pushed herself up off the bed. Turning away from them in disgust, she stood shivering for several seconds before she finally spoke. "Get out." She turned to face them. "Both of you. Get out. Now." She wasn't yelling this time. Her voice was deadly calm.

"Look, Lisa," Glen began. "You need to put this in perspective. Nothing has changed. I love you. I do. There's nothing between Lou and me. Like she said. It's a business deal."

Lisa didn't answer. Instead she turned her back. There was nothing she could say. They couldn't see what was wrong with what they were doing and she couldn't understand how they couldn't see. The sound of her mother's voice had her cringing.

"Lisa," Lou said sharply. "You are the senior vice president of *Golden Hotels*. A professional. I expect you to take care of business as usual. No more tantrums. No crying like a baby. It's simply unfortunate that you came home when you did, and that's all. Just an unfortunate incident. Why did you come home anyway? I told you to have those reports ready."

Lisa turned to explain about the headache but stopped herself. How easily she slipped into subservience when her mother spoke to her. Well, no more. "I don't have to explain myself to you, Mother. Now I said to get out."

"Fine then. I'll leave," Lou announced. "But when I see you at the dinner tonight you will be in complete control of your emotions."

Lisa started to say that there was no way in the world she was gonna go to that dinner and pretend to be a happy little family with Lou and Glen, but she stopped herself. They would just argue with her and

she had no desire to argue further. She just wanted to be alone and so, she simply nodded.

Lou dressed quickly then turned to Glen with a smile. "We will finish our business another time."

Glen looked toward Lisa then back to Lou, a smug expression on his handsome face. "You can count on it."

Lisa watched Lou leave before she addressed her fiancé. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"You too. Out. I want you out."

"I'm not going anywhere. You and I are gonna have a little talk."

I think not, Lisa thought. She turned and moved casually toward her dresser, slowly opened the top drawer, reverently picked up the small pistol and turned, speaking softly. "I don't think so."

Glen's eyes opened wide. "Are you out of your mind?"

"You really want to find out?"

He hesitated. Raised his hands in defense. "No. I'll leave."

She used the gun to point toward his closet. "You'd better take something to wear for tonight and for a few more days. I don't want to see you here."

"Lisa, you're not thinking clearly."

"Actually, I think I am, maybe for the first time." She wiggled the pistol as he moved around gathering belongings. "Hurry up. I'm not promising that this thing won't go off."

He stopped next to her as he headed out. "You'll pay for this."

"Ditto."

He wiped at a small trickle of blood running from his nose. "And for this."

"Ya think? We'll just see about that. Now go."

She followed him down the hall to the front door. The moment the penthouse door closed behind him, she locked it. And then, the tears came. She went to the bathroom, grabbed tissue and blotted at her eyes. I'm an idiot, she thought. An idiot. They must have had a darn good laugh about stupid, naive, Lisa. They'd both come to her office before they'd left the building. She guessed they'd been making sure she wouldn't be coming home anytime soon. "Darn you, Glen, we were supposed to be married," she murmured. She stared into the mirror at her reflection and for the first time in forever, allowed herself to have a good, long cry.

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'*So You Had a Bad Day*' crooned over the airwaves. You could say that, Lisa thought. The sound of the radio was about the only thing keeping her from feeling like she was the only person in the world. She'd been driving for hours in the bright red 'vette. She'd grabbed a suitcase, thrown stuff haphazardly into it and taken off. At first she'd driven in circles, going over everything in her mind, trying to decide what to do, because she definitely wasn't going to that stupid party. Finally, she'd headed north on I-5, and somewhere along the line, turned right, and somehow ended up near Bakersfield. After that came mountains and desert, and the rest of the country.

How ridiculous would it be for her to leave her extremely lucrative job and just take off, find a new life, one that didn't include her mother and Glen? How ridiculous would it be for her not to? For sure she wasn't going back anytime soon. She'd eventually have to go back to get her clothes, and the little bit of stuff she'd collected over the years. She'd have to get her car too, the one she'd driven before Lou gave her the Corvette. Forty-five states lay to the east of her present location. She just had to decide which way to point the car. Her only regret would be leaving her position. She'd worked so hard to get there, still, there was no way she was gonna work next to those two debauched individuals.

She'd worked as director of advertising for the corporation before making vice president and had quite an impressive financial package built up for herself, most of which Lou knew nothing about, thank goodness. Properly handled, she could retire right now and not have to worry. With that thought in mind, she noticed a sign for a twenty-four hour buffet at a truck stop and pulled in.

After fueling up, she went inside, at first thinking to have her regular salad, but being bent on self-destruction, she served herself a giant mound of fried chicken and mashed potatoes. Frowning when she found no open booth where she could sit and sulk, she sat at the counter and kept her head down. After her third trip to the buffet the waitress cleared the dishes again and shook her head. "So, what's your story, honey? What brings you out here all alone? Let me guess. Guy troubles?"

Lisa looked up, intending to tell the waitress to mind her own business, but the look on the woman's face was pure compassion and it touched Lisa somewhere deep in her soul, so much, that her eyes became moist. Lisa never cried. Never. And now for the second time

today she felt like she would break down sobbing. Gee, could it have something to do with the fact that she'd just caught her fiancé in bed with her mother?

The waitress patted Lisa's hand. "I didn't mean to intrude and I sure didn't mean to upset you."

Lisa sniffed and wiped at her eyes with the edge of her napkin. The waitress was probably close to fifty, with bottle-blonde hair, ruby red lips, and bright blue eyes that belied her age. Her name tag read 'Dolly' in bold, black letters and she looked at Lisa with understanding eyes.

"Leave the poor girl alone, Dolly," a man two seats down said. Lisa looked his way. She saw a lean man in his forties, rough around the edges, with a scruffy beard, and a hat that bore the name of a nationwide trucking company.

Dolly faced him, hands on her ample hips. "Whaddya know, Hank? Sometimes a girl needs another female to talk to." She turned back to Lisa. "Did I upset you, honey?"

Lisa smiled. "It's okay. It's not you."

"So, what happened? You and your man break up?"

Lisa snorted. "To put it mildly."

"Big fight?"

"Huge."

"Maybe the two of you will be able to work it out after you settle down a bit."

"Yeah, well, that's not gonna happen," Lisa said quickly.

"He found a new girl, didn't he?" Hank said. "The guy must be freakin' crazy."

"Shut up, Hank," Dolly snapped. She turned back, eyeing Lisa. "He's right, huh?"

Lisa nodded. A tear escaped.

"Look what you've gone and done now, Hank."

Lisa waved away Dolly's concern. "It's okay. He's right. Only it's much worse than Glen finding a new girl. I wish that's all it was."

"That's his name then? Glen?"

Lisa sniffed and nodded. "Yes, he's my fiancé. *Was* my fiancé." She blew out a breath. "I don't know what I ever saw in him." She looked up at Dolly. "I caught him in bed with..." She couldn't bring herself to say it.

Dolly patted her hand. "That's okay, hon. I understand."

Hank shook his head. "I don't believe this Glen fella was in his

right mind, little girl, cuz you must be the sweetest lookin' thing this side of the Mississippi."

"Well, I'd believe anything when it comes to men," Dolly said.

"Hey, Dolly, you're hurting my feelings here," a fiftyish, heavyset man just on the other side of Hank grumbled.

Dolly shrugged with a smile. "Sorry, Bill, but are you telling me you never broke anybody's heart?"

Hank laughed. "Oh yeah, he did. It was his mother's, the day he was born."

Bill rolled his eyes. "Funny, Hank. Really, little girl, don't think we're all bad just 'cause some guy did you wrong."

"Look at it this way," Dolly said. "It's good you found out now, before the wedding."

"So, what are ya gonna do now?" Hank asked.

"Do?" Lisa asked.

"Yeah, do. Like, go get plastered, go give him a piece of your mind, or even better, go throw a rock through the girl's window."

"Don't listen to him," Bill said. "He'll get you in trouble. Best thing would be to go home to mom."

The tears began anew. "There is no home."

"Aww, sweetie, sure there is. Everybody's got a home somewhere," Dolly said.

"Not everyone."

"No mom or dad?"

Lisa shook her head. "Don't know who my father is. And my mother— my mother is dead to me."

"That's tough," Hank said.

"Well, little girl, maybe it's time to make amends with your mom," Bill suggested.

Lisa laughed bitterly. She may as well let them know the complete dirty secret. "That would be impossible."

"Come on now," Dolly said. "Are you sure? Maybe this thing between you and your mother, maybe it was a misunderstanding."

"I wish that with all my heart."

"Maybe it's not as bad as you think," Dolly stated, determined to find the silver lining.

Lisa blew out a breath. "He was with my mother. I caught my fiancé in bed with my mother."

The resounding silence almost made Lisa laugh. Almost.

It was Bill who broke the silence. "Well, now, that's just sick, isn't it?" he lamented.

Lisa nodded. "The sick part is they couldn't understand why I was so upset. They actually expected me to make an appearance at my birthday dinner tonight. Yeah, right. Me sitting in between the two of them as they toast me, all the while giving each other sly looks over their glasses of champagne."

"Oh, Lord, honey," Dolly said sadly. "It's your birthday? Oh, now, that's just sad. Just too sad." She looked up, realizing she wasn't making anything any better. "Just a minute," she said as she slipped through the stainless-steel door into the kitchen.

"Hey, little girl," Bill said. "I know people. You want me to get someone to rough him up a little? Because, I mean, I think he deserves to feel a little pain."

Lisa smiled at Bill. "Thanks, but no. I got in one good shot to his nose. Last I saw it was pouring blood."

"Thatta girl," Hank said. "I'd like to have seen that."

The kitchen door swung open and Dolly emerged carrying a chocolate layer cake covered with candles. "We usually sell these by the slice but we're making an exception in honor of your birthday. How old are you?" Dolly asked.

"Twenty-five," Lisa blubbered, grabbing a fresh napkin to wipe at her eyes.

Dolly added a few more candles and then announced her birthday to the restaurant at large. Next thing Lisa knew, the entire place, consisting mostly of truckers, was singing to her, patting her on the back and coming to collect their free piece of cake.

Lisa couldn't stop the tears from falling. She'd spent a lifetime keeping them bottled up as she was instructed to do by her mother, but the dam had busted and there was no stopping them now. Complete strangers were showing her more kindness than she'd ever been shown in her entire life. Complete strangers. She grabbed another napkin.

Once the cake had disappeared, which didn't take all that long, Dolly began clearing dishes. They'd extracted more information from Lisa during the chocolate fest. She lived in a penthouse with her fiancé. She worked for her mother's company. She had no desire to return to either place.

"So, what are you gonna do?" Dolly asked.

Lisa shrugged. "The only other home I've ever really known was

my grandparents' house in Georgia. We visited them twice. Two times in my entire life, and both times I remember wishing I could stay there forever. Of course, that was just the longings of a little girl."

"Have they passed?" Dolly asked gently.

"I have no idea."

Hank stood to pay his bill. "Why don't ya find out? You ain't got nothin' else to do?"

Lisa looked up at him. "I– I guess I could do that." She shook her head. "Maybe not though. I don't even remember how to get there. I don't even know their first names."

"You know a town?"

"Pine Forest. I thought it was the most wonderful name for a little town. You know, kind of like Mayberry."

"I know a Pine Forest in Georgia," Bill said. "Just south and west of Macon."

"Really?"

"Yep, been through the area many times. There's a few cattle ranches, some farms. I do some trucking in and out of there. You say you don't know their names?"

Lisa nodded, grimacing. How ridiculous that must sound to not know your own family's names. "I suppose their last name is Lewis, same as mine."

Dolly looked up at Bill. "How hard do you think it would be for her to go to a small town like *Pine Forest* and find out where the Lewis family lives?"

Bill laughed. "You kiddin' me? I bet you just ask anyone on the street and they'll know."

Hank motioned for Dolly to give him Lisa's bill too. When Lisa started to protest he insisted. "It's your birthday. Let an old man have some fun."

"Thank you," Lisa said with a smile.

Hank finished paying and turned to Lisa, his hands on his hips. "So, you coming?"

"Coming? Coming where?"

Bill nodded at Hank, stood with a smile. "To Georgia. If you're serious 'bout wantin' to go, we'd feel a lot better escorting you there. I'm on my way to Florida, Hank's heading to South Carolina. We'll part ways with Hank in Atlanta and hit seventy-five south. We're looking at four days' drive but we can make it longer since you ain't

used to driving for so long."

"Are you guys serious?" Lisa asked, feeling her heart start to race. Why not? Why shouldn't she? She had a car, a fat bank account, credit cards galore and nothing else to do. She could buy whatever she needed as she went.

"Heck yeah, we're serious," Hank said. "You got anything better to do?"

Lisa laughed. "Not a thing."

Dolly clapped her hands together. "Oh, this is so exciting. Please, Lisa, you just have to give me a call sometime and let me know how things turn out."

Lisa exchanged numbers with her, leaned over and gave her a hug. "I will. I promise."

"Okay, then," Bill said. "Let's go, little lady. We're gonna get you a CB radio and put you in the cradle."

"Sounds delightful."

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Isaiah 30:20-21

"Although the Lord gives you the bread of adversity
and the water of affliction, your teachers will be hidden no
more; with your own eyes you will see them. Whether you
turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind
you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'"

Chapter 3

Lisa availed herself of every foul word she'd ever heard, cursing under her breath as she threw off her sandals and rummaged through the suitcase that sat open on the passenger seat. She'd shopped at several outlet malls as she'd traveled across the country, adding to what she'd initially brought with her when she'd stormed out of the penthouse. She hadn't gone crazy shopping but she had bought the bare necessities like clothing, shoes, and of course, the luggage to hold them. What she looked for currently were the Nike runners she'd purchased back in Amarillo. She'd needed them so she could run out her frustrations. Her escorts had watched from their rigs as she'd circled rest areas and truck stops. Today, she was glad she'd bought those shoes as she was about to go on a little hike.

Finding one shoe, she tucked it in her lap and went back to search for the mate while she continued to rant. "The needle says a quarter tank. A quarter tank. How can I be out of gas?" She found the second shoe and plunged her hand around in the bag looking for some socks. "Stupid car, out of gas. Why? Why now?" she mumbled. Why not when she'd had two truckers driving beside her who could have helped her out? Well, probably because they hadn't allowed her gas to get below half a tank, she admitted.

Finally finding what she sought, she sat back in the driver's seat and pulled on the shoes and socks. She knew she probably had at least a couple more miles to go to reach her grandmother's place. The walk was nothing to Lisa since she was used to working out every day, but she didn't want to make it in sandals.

She finished tying her shoes, stood, grabbed her trucker's hat, a gift from Hank, and stuffed her hair up inside to keep it off her neck. Catching a glimpse of herself in the car window, she made a face at the hat. "Cute," she muttered.

She'd considered calling a tow truck, but she knew she was very close to her destination and decided she just couldn't wait to see her grandparents. So she would go find them and then ask them whom she should call to tow her car. Lisa tucked her purse into her suitcase so she

wouldn't have to carry anything, backed out of the car and slammed the door. Pointing the remote to lock the car, she listened for the beep, stuffed the keys in her pocket and started walking, but stopped suddenly. Backing up, she turned and delivered a fierce kick to the tire. "Take that, you candy-apple red piece of junk."

When she'd first realized she was out of gas, she thought she would walk back to town. However, she figured she was probably closer to her destination than she was to town. Close to her destination. She smiled at the thought. After five days on the road she was almost there. Bill, her friendly trucker, had been right about asking anyone in town. She'd stopped at a convenience store just inside the city limit and asked the clerk if she knew where the Lewis place was located. The clerk and two customers had joined in to give her directions to the Lewis home, apparently a very large, very old, farmhouse situated between two ranches on a dirt road about three or four miles out of town that you can't miss. "Very picturesque, just like a postcard," they'd said. Lisa had been so excited about being so close, she hadn't bothered to gas up. She had a quarter tank anyway, or so she thought. She should've been just fine. Oh, well. She made a mental note to have the gas gauge repaired.

The walk wasn't so bad, well, other than the heat . . . and the humidity. It was very warm for May, she thought, but that was also probably par for the course in middle Georgia. Regardless, lovely large trees, giant hardwoods mixed with tall pines, lined the road and gave plenty of shade on her left side. A split-rail fence edged the road on her right. Looking past the fence, across green fields dotted with a few giant trees, she could see a large brick home way up on a hill surrounded by thousands of acres of lush, green land. The home was like something out of "*Gone With the Wind*" with white columns in front. Lisa wished she could get closer and examine the detail.

The dense woods to her left though, made her glad she'd run out of gas in the middle of the day. Who knew what kind of animals lived in there? She gave a shudder, drew a deep breath, and pasted a smile on her face, turning her mind to more positive things. The fragrance of pine and earth acted like a balm for her soul and lifted her spirits considerably. She'd heard about Georgia pines. They really were quite pleasant.

According to the directions given her, she had one more turn to make. The road she was on would dead end at the dirt road where the

farmhouse was located. She would turn left on that dirt road because, as they'd said at the gas station, "you cain't turn right, lest ya wanna visit the Stewart ranch." She looked up to her right again. The large brick mansion must be the Stewart homestead. Looking back over her shoulder, she could no longer see her car and she wondered how much farther to the dirt road. The question was quickly answered as she rounded the next bend.

The blacktop she walked definitely ended at a dirt road. Lisa was glad that so far their directions had been right on, except that no one had said one thing about a gate closing off the dirt road from the public roadway. Nevertheless, here it was, a giant metal gate across the road with a large sign that read, "Cattle Crossing - Do Not Enter."

Lisa climbed up on the gate and peered left down the dirt road. There were no cattle in sight. Not on the road to her left, nor on the Stewart land to her right. Directly across from where she stood on the gate, there was nothing but dense woods. Looking back left, she noticed not far down the road on the left-hand side, a high privacy fence began. That's it, she thought. That's my grandparents' land, just a jog away. So many emotions bubbled up. Excitement. Relief. Gratitude. And yeah, a little fear, for she didn't know what she would do if she was rejected. She'd come this far though, and she wasn't gonna let fear hold her back.

Looking again to her right, she noticed another wide gate similar to the one upon which she stood. It led to what she'd decided must be the Stewart land, and was propped open with a big rock. Next to that gate, just inside the property was a Jeep, pretty well covered with red dirt and rust.

Lisa had no intention of letting some stupid gate keep her from her destination. How dare they think they can close off a public road anyway? People have some nerve.

Carefully, Lisa eased herself up and over the gate, jumping down the last few feet. "Nothing to it," she mumbled, brushing off her white shorts and straightening her sleeveless, purple flowered blouse. She started off down the road. When she got to where the privacy fence began she tried to peek through, but couldn't see anything. "Guess that's why they call it a privacy fence," she mused aloud.

Walking happily along, she lightly ran her hand over the rough wood of the fence as she passed. She tried to not look across the road into the dark woods because they gave her the creeps. She wasn't used

to rural areas. She was used to hotels, penthouse apartments, swimming pools, and malls.

She thought for a moment she heard some kind of animal noises coming from the woods. It was probably just her imagination, but still, she picked up her pace. Peering down the road, she looked for a break in the fence that would indicate an entrance to the farm but all she could see was solid fence as it disappeared around a curve in the road. Then, she did see something. Something horrifying.

A large cow came trotting around the bend, heading straight toward her. Then another and another. Then the road was full of them. Unable to move forward any longer, Lisa turned, pressing her back against the fence in an effort to get out of the way. It didn't seem to help. They were close to stepping on her toes, bumping into her, pushing her into the fence. She began to panic, thinking she was gonna be squashed to death.

Looking for a way out, she realized the woods across the street that she'd been so afraid of just might be her only hope. If she could make it across the street she could take refuge in there. She pushed at one of the cows as it passed, then grunted as its backside rammed her into the fence, taking her breath away. The excruciating sudden pain in her side caused her to make the decision, she'd better get across that road. Decision made, she darted out between the large animals.

Trying to make her way across the sea of brown reminded her of an old video game where a frog tries to cross the highway without getting squashed. She wasn't doing very well. She was maybe halfway across when one of the big, fat, stupid cows stomped on her toe. "Ow!" Instinctively, she bent down toward her foot which turned out to be a mistake. Her head hit the hip of the next animal, and she became disoriented. Stumbling, she raised her hand to her forehead. The animals didn't seem to care two figs that they were shoving her all over the road, she thought indignantly. It was as if they were consciously trying to knock her down and stomp on her.

Lisa was getting worried. Being jostled by huge beasts was not her version of fun. Something hit her head from behind. Dizzy now, she stumbled forward and smacked her face on a rump. "Ugh," she grunted as her hands covered her nose. When she pulled them away they were covered with blood, and it dawned on her that she was in real trouble. There was virtually no space now between each animal. Wedged in on all sides, she could barely breathe. Light-headed, her vision blurring,

she knew she was going down. When the next cow tossed its head back at her and hit her in the jaw it was all over.

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Chaz Stewart took his hat off, wiped his face with his sleeve. "Hot as heck today."

His friend Josh nodded. "Waay too hot for May. I guess we should just be glad it's not raining."

"I dunno, rain would feel pretty good right about now." Chaz put his hat back on and pulled back on the reins when his chestnut, Beebe, danced sideways. "Whoa, girl. There now."

They were almost finished for the day. The last leg of herding cattle to the spring pastures down the small dirt road was the easiest part. Like running them down a chute.

Josh turned in the saddle, waved at the two friends bringing up the rear. "I'm starvin'. Cain't wait to grab a beer and a pizza at Joe's."

"I'm with ya," Chaz grunted. Something caught his eye and he peered down the road where they were coming up on the Lewis place. "What the hell? Did you see that?"

Josh looked up. "What?"

Chaz raised up in his stirrups. "Good grief, there's someone in the road." He dug his boots into Beebe's sides, springing ahead. Maneuvering between the cattle, he caught a glimpse of a girl in a brown cap, her face covered in blood. His heart raced. It seemed to take him forever to get to her side and just as he did she began sliding limply down toward the ground.

Instinctively, he grabbed for the back of her shirt and yanked her into the air, but the shirt buttons flew, the shirt front tore open and she started sliding out. He jerked her toward him and was barely able to catch her against his chest. She was out cold.

Chaz made it through the gate to his place and left Josh to deal with the cattle. He didn't have to go far for his medical box. The jeep was parked only a few yards inside the gate. He swung off Beebe, pulling the girl with him, and laid her down gently on the grass.

Just inside the gate, Josh maneuvered his horse between the jeep and the cattle to make sure the beasts stayed on course and didn't venture toward the girl on the ground. Chaz threw off his hat, grabbed his medical box and swung it down to the grass to rest beside the girl. He checked her for injuries, took her pulse, listened to her heart. He reached to remove the hat from her head so he could check her pupils.

Mounds of vibrant red curls tumbled down, taking his breath away. "Sweet Lord."

The discovery made him look closer at her. The entire row of buttons was missing from the front of her shirt which lay open. Blood from her nose stained her white lacy bra. This was not a young girl as he'd supposed. This was a woman. A freakin' gorgeous woman. He watched her breasts rise and fall, telling himself he was simply making sure she was breathing. Her taut body was tan and lean and... He shook himself, forced himself to focus, opened his box and began an examination. Her pupils were reactive. Her breathing clear. He ran his hand over her head, looking for injuries. "Hey, sweetheart," he whispered. "Come on, now. You've been out too long. Wake up."

He pulled out the blood pressure monitor and wrapped the cuff around her arm. While the machine pumped the cuff he ran his hands over her arms and ribs looking for broken bones.

Lisa kept her eyes closed as she came back to reality. She knew a man held her down. She knew her shirt was open and his hands moved over her body. If he thought she would simply lie still while he had his way with her he could think again. She stretched her fingers out slowly, hoping to find a rock or something within reach to use as a weapon. Her hand closed around a small curved machine, maybe one of those old personal CD players. Holding her breath she lifted it and swung it at the man's head.

Chaz caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye. He moved quickly, but not enough to be missed altogether. He grunted as the blood pressure monitor grazed his temple. He rolled and came up quickly. "What the heck, lady!"

Lisa rose up, intending to strike again, but he grabbed her by the wrist and wrested the machine from her grasp.

"What do you think you're doing?" he barked.

"I'm keeping you from..." She stopped when she noticed the stethoscope hanging around his neck. Her eyes moved to the blood pressure monitor in his hand. Only then did she realize the cuff was still attached to her arm. "You're a doctor?"

"Paramedic."

"Oh," she murmured, her eyes darting up to meet his. "I'm so sorry I hit you. I— I thought you were trying to..."

He held his hand up. "I get it."

She put her hand to her head and swayed. He took her by the

shoulders. "You're white as a ghost. You need to sit back down."

She didn't argue, but sank down immediately. "Uh oh, I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Great."

She turned away, on all fours, heaving violently. Chaz moved behind her and held her mass of hair out of the way. When she finished he handed her some gauze as a makeshift cloth.

Wiping her mouth, she turned to sit. "Thank you."

"Do you mind if I check your pupils?" he asked sardonically.

She smiled sweetly. "Go ahead. I promise to behave."

As he did his doctor thing she looked him over. He was a large man. Scruffy and dirty. No wonder she didn't recognize him as a doctor or a paramedic or whatever. He was very tan, with golden blond hair and dark eyes. The classic chiseled jaw and wide mouth made her think of the GI Joe army figures. The cowboy hat lying nearby gave her imagination an even more intriguing picture.

"Do you hurt anywhere?" he asked.

"My nose. And my side."

He tore at some plastic and held a cold pak out to her. "Here, put this on your nose and lie down."

"Lie down?"

"Yes, lie down. I'm gonna see if anything's broken."

She sighed and did as she was told. He began running his hands over her ribs, just below her breasts, then moved out to her side and down. She winced, as he zeroed in on one spot about six inches below her right armpit. He pressed again.

"Ow, that hurts."

He watched her face as he pressed. Her eyes were the greenest green he'd ever seen. Her face, though dirty and bloody was a perfect heart shape. Yep, a real looker. He pulled himself back to the medical analysis. "Your ribs are bruised. Could be broken. You need x-rays."

"No. I'm sure it's okay."

He shrugged. "It's your call."

"No x-rays. Besides, I really need to get going."

"Which brings me to my next question."

"Which is?"

"Where *are* you going and what in the heck were you doing walking down that road? It was closed off or can't you read?"

She sat up, and sneered right back at him. "That was more than

one question and, yes, I can read. I ran out of gas a mile or so up the road. I knew I didn't have far to go and I started walking. I've come a really long way and wasn't gonna let some closed gate keep me from my destination. Who do you think you are anyway, closing off a public road whenever you feel like it?"

"Lady, we been running our cattle on that road every fall and spring for the last eighty years or more and I don't think we need your permission. Folks around here know what's what. No one has ever actually been stupid enough to walk down a road that's closed to a cattle crossing."

"Well, you shouldn't just assume that only town folks would be using the road."

"Townsfolk or no, the sign was posted. You could've been hurt a lot worse than some broken ribs."

"Well, I wasn't, so let's just drop it, okay?"

He shook his head in disgust. "Fine, okay. So who are you and what are you doing down this way? I mean, there's nothing down here. Maybe you took a wrong turn."

She pressed her lips together. Should she tell him who she is? If he works on this ranch he'll find out soon enough. "My name is Lisa. Lisa Lewis. My grandmother lives somewhere on this road."

Chaz's mouth fell open in surprise. "Lisa? Little Lisa? Well, whaddya know!"

"I don't know about 'little Lisa', but yes, I'm Lisa."

He looked at her appreciatively. "Yeah, I don't know about 'little' either."

Suddenly self-conscious she tugged at the pieces of her shirt, trying to pull it together. "You know who I am?"

"Sure. Everyone knows who you are. Maddie keeps your picture on her refrigerator. Everyone knows about when Louise Lewis got pregnant and took off. You're all Maddie ever talks about."

"Maddie?"

"Yeah, Maddie. You know, your grandmother?"

Lisa felt her face redden. How could she tell him no, she didn't know Maddie was her grandmother?

"I can't believe she didn't say anything to me about you coming."

"Well, she doesn't know."

"You're kidding?"

Lisa shook her head. "It was an impulsive thing. I wasn't even sure

if I could find my way here."

"An impulsive thing? What do you mean?"

Lisa frowned and sighed. "Some things happened in my life and– and I felt the need to find my roots."

He nodded. "When things get rough, coming home is the best thing to do." He stood and offered her his hand. "I'm Chaz."

Lisa let him pull her to her feet. "Chaz?"

"Nickname for Charles. Charles Anthony Stewart the third."

"Fancy name."

"Yeah, for a not-so-fancy guy." He touched her shoulder. "Still feeling dizzy?"

"I don't think so." She sighed, feeling a little guilty about causing so much trouble. "Listen, thanks for rescuing me."

"Yeah, you're welcome."

"You said your last name is Stewart?"

"That's right."

"Then this is your ranch?"

"My family's ranch. My father and I run it."

She nodded. "So, I guess I was pretty lucky that a paramedic came upon me right at the time that I was being attacked by vicious killer cows."

He laughed. "Cows are extremely passive. We were moving them from the south pasture for the spring."

"And you just happen to be a paramedic in your spare time?"

"I was. I'm a Marine. I was a corpsman. Two tours in Iraq. One in Afghanistan. One for the Pine County fire department."

She smiled. So she'd been right about the GI Joe. "Impressive."

"Whatever." He turned and grabbed a towel out of his jeep along with a bottle of water, poured the water over the towel and handed it to her. "Here, for your face."

"Thanks." She wiped the blood from her face the best she could. "I can't see my grandmother looking like this," she said, tugging on her torn shirt. She looked up at him. "Do you think I could bum a ride back to my car?"

He nodded as he gathered his medical supplies and threw the box into the back of the Jeep. "I just need to take care of Beebe."

He grabbed his hat, pushed his hair back and placed it on his head, then turned and helped her into the Jeep, looking up as riders approached.

"Hey. So is she okay?" Josh asked, nodding toward Lisa.

Chaz reached behind his seat, pulled out the windbreaker jacket he kept there and handed it to Lisa. She tugged it around her modestly. "Lisa Lewis, meet Josh Edwards." He nodded past Josh to two others. "And that's Evan, and the big dude there is Troy. They're neighbors come to help me drive the cattle."

Lisa smiled. "Hi."

Each man grabbed the tip of their hat and nodded.

"Lisa Lewis? As in Maddie's Lisa?" Josh asked.

"One and the same," Chaz confirmed. "I've got to get her to her car. Can you take care of Beebe for me?"

"No problem," Josh said as he dismounted. "Hold on and let me get the gate."

Lisa watched as Josh went to open the gate that had closed the road to the public.

Chaz cranked up the Jeep. "Thanks. Catch you guys later." He put the Jeep in gear and took off.

"That is one fine looking lady," Troy muttered as he watched them drive away.

Josh grabbed Beebe's reins and remounted. "Yeah she is."

"Chaz doctored her up," Evan mused.

Josh nodded.

"Well now, that's interesting," Troy said.

Josh snapped the reins. "Let's get to work."

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Chaz pulled up to the red Corvette. "*This* is your car?"

She smiled. "It's mine all right."

"So Maddie's Lisa is doing pretty well for herself."

She shrugged. "Well, *I* didn't buy it. It was a birthday present from someone."

"Wow. That's some present."

"I guess, but as it turned out, it didn't mean much of anything. It's just a car."

"So, you're saying that you and the person who gave it to you are on the outs?"

"To say the very least."

He frowned. "But you kept the car."

She glanced at him as she unlocked the passenger side door and began rummaging through her suitcase to find another shirt. "I don't

think I like your tone."

He shrugged. "I call it like I see it."

She stood up. "Well, see this then. I was owed, and for a lot more than this car is worth."

His eyes shuttered. "Whatever." He didn't want to insult her mostly because she was Maddie's pride and joy, but he'd come close to telling her that some things shouldn't be for sale.

She glared at him as she jerked the torn shirt from her body.

"Oh," Chaz muttered, as he quickly turned around. When he turned back she was dressed in a yellow tank top.

She looked down at her shorts and let go of a string of curses.

Chaz's eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me?"

She looked up. "Oh, yeah, well, sorry if I offended your fine sensibilities," she said sarcastically. "Ya see, when I get really upset I tend to curse."

He shrugged. "Doesn't bother *me.* It's just that the language doesn't match the angelic face."

She snorted in response as she reached back into the car and started going through the suitcase again.

"So, what has you all upset?"

"There's blood all over my shorts."

Chaz watched as she leaned into the car, in another bag, presumably for more shorts. He couldn't help but watch as she moved back and forth.

She straightened, shaking out a pair of jeans. "These will have to do." She toed off her shoes and then looked up as she unfastened her shorts, her eyebrows arched. He sighed and turned away.

"I'm decent," she said a minute later.

He turned back. She was putting her shoes back on. What kind of woman was this creature? She didn't seem to think anything about undressing right there in the middle of the road, and right in front of him. She didn't seem to think anything about leaving her boyfriend or husband and yet, accepted his car as a gift. He shook his head. Women. Nevertheless, he offered to take her to Maddie's and then come back to gas up her car and deliver it to her, as any southern gentleman would do. He loaded her and her belongings into the Jeep and headed to the Lewis farmhouse.

As he drove he didn't miss her wringing her hands in anticipation. This should be interesting, he thought. He was glad he would be there

for Maddie.

Lisa held tight to the edge of her seat as Chaz swung the Jeep through the gate. Her mouth fell open. It was like stepping back in time. She was reminded of the Waltons' homestead on the old TV series. A giant oak stood in the center of a huge front lawn, surrounded by lilies and a circle of large rocks. Wind chimes and a birdhouse hung from its lower branches. The house was large and white with a full wraparound porch. To the right of the house was a grove of what Lisa decided must be some kind of fruit-bearing trees and beyond those, to the left, toward the back were giant trees she was pretty sure were pecan trees. Also to the left of the house, surrounded by a high chain-link fence was a piece of land, ploughed into neat furrows with some green plants coming up out of the ground, the variety of which Lisa had no idea.

Chaz drove up the gravel drive that circled around the tree to the front walk. Braking sharply, he jumped from the vehicle and quickly gathered Lisa's baggage. He stopped and raised his eyebrows at her. "You coming?"

She looked nervously at the house, then back to Chaz. He immediately regretted his abrupt manner. She was afraid. He'd never known her to come to visit her grandmother until now. Obviously, she'd come when she was little because the picture Maddie proudly displayed was taken in front of the house. She'd probably never been back since. Until now. Well, it's about time, he thought. He went around to help her down. "Maddie's a great lady. You'll like her."

Lisa smiled nervously. "I'm sure I will."

He put the bags down and offered his hand. "She'll like you too. Come on."

She swallowed, took his hand. It was warm and large and strong and even once she stepped onto solid ground, she still didn't want to let go. They'd had a rough beginning, her and Chaz, as first meetings go, but in this, he seemed to be her ally.

As if he could sense her dilemma, he pressed his free hand on top of hers. "It's gonna be okay."

She smiled at him. Nodded. "Thanks."

They started toward the house when the front door swung open and a small, elf-like woman stepped out onto the porch. "Chaz, how very nice of you to come, and you've brought a friend. That's wonderful!" She motioned with her hands. "Come in, come in."

Chaz stopped at the bottom of the porch steps. "Maddie, I've brought someone who's more than just a friend. I've brought someone you know."

"You have?" Maddie picked up the glasses that dangled on a string and placed them neatly on her face.

Lisa watched her. All she could think of was, Mrs. Claus. Her adorable grandmother squinted at her, touching her chin as she tried to figure out who Lisa was and Lisa had mercy on her. "It's me, Grandmother. It's Lisa."

There was a gasp as Maddie's hands flew to her cheeks. "Lisa? Oh, my little Lisa!" She started for the steps, but Lisa moved quickly up to the porch so her grandmother wouldn't have to come down. She bent down to be enfolded in her grandmother's arms.

"Lisa, oh, Lisa. What are you doing here? Oh, listen to me. It doesn't matter. The important thing is you're here. You're really here. Oh, dear, come in. Please, come in." She held Lisa's arm in an iron fist and pulled her through the door. She turned back remembering Chaz. "Oh, Chaz, come in dear."

He grinned. "I'm coming. Just grabbing these bags."

Maddie's hands flew over Lisa's face. "Oh my goodness, let me look at you. Well, you must be just about the prettiest girl I've ever seen. Don't you think so, Chaz?"

"Definitely," he chuckled as the screen door swung shut. "Where do you want these?"

"Oh, dear, let me think. I suppose the green room is the cleanest right now. Besides, it's one of the few that has its own bathroom. Yes, the green room will be fine."

"Yes, ma'am," he said as he headed up the wide staircase.

Maddie frowned now, as she continued looking Lisa over. "Hmm, is that— blood on your cheek? And your nose is all red. Have you been crying?"

"No. I, uh, I had a little accident on the way here."

"Oh, no!"

"But I'm okay, Grandmother. Really, I'm okay."

"Well, good then, but Lisa, you just simply must stop all this formal 'grandmother' stuff. I'm either Grams or Maddie to all the folks 'round here. Nothing as formal as grandmother."

Lisa smiled. "Okay, Grams sounds good."

"Wonderful. Now, are you hungry? When did you eat last? It's

almost supper time."

"I'm not too hungry right now."

"Nonsense. You must have been traveling all day. I'm sure you're starving."

"She's not hungry probably because she was knocked unconscious by a bunch of vicious cows not too long ago."

Lisa frowned up at Chaz as he came down the steps.

"Nonsense," Grams repeated. "Cows are extremely passive."

Chaz raised his eyebrows at Lisa. "Told ya."

Lisa giggled.

"Knocked unconscious, you say?" Maddie asked.

"Actually, Maddie, if she gets some rest and doesn't feel any dizziness or nausea she can eat a little something in a few hours. She should be able to keep it down."

Maddie nodded. "You're the doc."

When Lisa started to disagree, Chaz interrupted. "Well, I've gotta be gettin' on. If you need me, you know the number." He leaned forward and kissed Maddie on the forehead.

Lisa was amazed. Her grandmother actually blushed.

Chaz turned to her, held out his hand. "It's been an adventure."

Lisa raised her nose in the air as she shook his hand. "I'm sure."

Chaz grinned as he waltzed out the door.

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"Come in," Lisa called at the soft knock on her door.

Grams pushed open the door and stepped in carrying a tray. The aromas drifting from the tray immediately had Lisa's mouth watering as Maddie set the tray down on the bed.

"How are you feeling, dear?" Grams asked.

Lisa sighed with a smile. She'd been told to rest by both her grandmother and the local ex-paramedic and she'd done just that. The hot bubble bath in the giant tub had been heavenly, topped only by snuggling down into the soft bed and breathing in the fresh smelling sheets. No fabric softener smelled this fresh. They must have dried out in the sunshine. "I feel wonderful, Grams," she said as she sat up and leaned back against the headboard.

"Well, good then." She reached for Lisa's hand. "Oh, Lisa, I'm so happy you've come to visit," Grams uttered softly. "My prayers have been answered."

Lisa had no idea what to say to that.

Grams turned, lifted the tray, placed it on Lisa's lap and handed her a fork. "Here, I hope you like it. It's my famous chicken pot pie."

Lisa took a small sample. The crust simply melted in her mouth. The chicken was juicy and tender, the carrots and peas and onions sweet and fresh. She moaned in ecstasy.

Grams clapped her hands together. "Oh my goodness, I think that means you like it."

"Oh, this is absolutely gourmet style delicious."

"That's exactly what everyone says. I'm so glad you like it. There's plenty more where that came from."

Lisa scooped up another bite. "This is wonderful. Maybe while I'm here you can teach me some of your secrets. I've never cooked but I'd love to learn."

"You're speakin' to my heart," Grams laughed. "How long do you think you'll be able to stay?"

Lisa grimaced. "About that. I don't know exactly how to ask this, but actually, I was hoping that instead of just a short visit, you would let me stay here a while."

"You mean like live here? With me?"

"If you think it would be too much, I'll understand. I can pay you– rent I mean."

Maddie frowned fiercely. "Nonsense my sweet girl. Too much? Oh, Lisa, you askin' to stay here are the only words you could have spoken that could make me feel any happier. Of course you can stay. As long as you like."

Lisa smiled. Grams sounded as if she really meant it. Wasn't that odd? This woman barely knew her. Lisa could be a psycho killer for all Grams knew. Maybe that's how it is with most families. They simply love to be around each other. But would her Grandfather feel the same way? "What about Grandfather? Will he mind?"

"Oh, dear," Grams sighed, taking Lisa's hand. "I'm sorry, Lisa, but your Grandfather passed away five years ago. It was a heart attack. It was very sudden."

Lisa barely knew the man so why did she suddenly feel like curling up in a ball and crying her eyes out? Maybe it was because of the missed opportunity to get to know him. "I'm so sorry, Grams. You must miss him very much."

"Yes, yes I do, but it's okay, dear. He's waiting for me and he watches over me."

Lisa smiled. What a pleasant thought. Then something struck her. "Does Lou know that her father passed away?"

Grams stood, wringing her hands. "Louise had a lot going on at that time. There was really no way she could have pulled herself away for the funeral. But to answer your question, yes, she knew. Dr. Stewart helped me to track her down."

"Dr. Stewart? You mean Chaz?"

Grams shook her head. "No, Chaz's mother, Patricia Stewart. She's a doctor at *Piedmont Hospital* up in Atlanta. She's such a nice young lady. She stayed by my side all through that terrible ordeal."

Lisa shook her head. "I'm glad you had someone here for you. I can't understand Lou. I mean, her own father died. There are times when what she does surprises even me. I should know by now."

Grams sighed. "Well dear, I'm at a loss myself when it comes to your mother."

"She's not my mother. Not anymore. Grams, I may as well tell you, I came home to you because I felt I had to get away from her and everything she represented. I'm so sorry to have to tell you that about your own daughter. I don't mean any disrespect and I don't want to upset you but I think if I'm gonna stay here, I should let you know where things stand between me and her."

Grams sighed wearily. "Oh dear, she's hurt you. I'm so sorry my sweet granddaughter. What did she do?"

"I'd rather not talk about it. I'd rather not talk about her at all. I hope that doesn't upset you, Grams, because you've been so kind."

"You don't have to apologize for feeling like you do. I'm not surprised by anything Louise does and believe it or not, I'm not blind to her faults. And if you'd rather not talk about her, then we won't. Not until you feel like talking. For now, you just get yourself some rest, make yourself at home and do anything you want to do."

Lisa's eyes misted. "Thank you, Grams."

"You don't have to thank me."

"I do. Thanks for taking me in, for not pressuring me, for keeping me in your memory."

"In my heart, dear. I've kept you in my heart."

Lisa smiled up at her, patted the side of the bed. "Will you sit while I eat and tell me all about your life here?"

It was quite some time later when Grams leaned over and kissed Lisa's forehead as she removed the tray. "Good night dear. I'll see you

in the morning."

Lisa smiled and snuggled down into the soft bed. Her heart was already beginning to heal.

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Psalm 4:8

"In peace I will lie down and sleep,
for you alone, Lord,
make me dwell in safety."

Chapter 4

Chaz grunted as he hefted the heavy wooden crosstie and eased it into place. He glanced up at the back of the large, white, frame house. She was inside there somewhere. A city girl for sure, he thought she was probably still sleeping. Several times during the night he'd awakened in his bed and found himself thinking about that fiery red hair spilled across the grass as he'd tended her. He'd finally given up trying to sleep and gotten an extra early start on his day. Besides his own ranch to run, he had dozens of projects for Miss Maddie that he needed to finish.

He'd promised Miss Maddie a terrace garden so she could work in the flower beds without having to bend over. They'd also talked about a new patio out back so she could sit outside in the evening after supper and watch the fireflies. Packing dirt around the crosstie, he surveyed his work. The first two levels of the terrace garden were complete. Soon, he'd have the third level ready and he would take Miss Maddie to a nursery and let her pick out what she wanted to plant. Then he'd get started on tearing up the old cracked concrete and leveling the ground for the new patio.

He looked toward the house again. He could smell the bacon Miss Maddie was cookin'. He'd probably be able to get himself invited to breakfast if he played his cards right. He sure wouldn't mind laying his eyes on pretty little Lisa again. First things first though, he needed to fix that front porch railing.

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Lisa stretched, purring like a kitten. Glancing at the little clock on the night table, she frowned. She was usually up by five and on her way to the gym. Of course, that was in LA. and there was a three-hour time difference, so it being seven now, wasn't so completely shiftless of her. Sniffing the air, her stomach rumbled. She smelled bacon definitely, and something baking. She pulled a pink silk robe on over the underwear and tank top she'd worn to bed and followed her nose to the kitchen.

"Good morning!" Grams sang, the moment Lisa stepped into the

kitchen. Grams reached up to give her a huge hug.

"Good morning," Lisa answered. She smiled, glancing around the large homey kitchen. Bacon sizzled in a pan. Freshly baked muffins sat on the counter, cooling. An old work table stood in the center of the floor, the country version of a kitchen island, Lisa supposed. Not as high as an island would be, Lisa thought, but it fit tiny little Grams perfectly. Sunshine slanted across a white wooden breakfast table that sat near a large bay window and gave a beautiful view of the pecan trees and the woods in the distance. Could she possibly admit that she felt more happy and content than she'd ever felt in her whole entire life? Could it really be so very simple? Just finding home? Just having someone say "good morning," or experiencing the smell of breakfast cooking?

Grams tugged on Lisa's robe, snapping her out of her musings. "Now isn't that pretty."

"Thanks. I picked it up on my way here at a mall in Birmingham."

"And just look at your pretty body. Just like someone on TV. I'm so glad you already feel comfortable enough with me to hang around in your undies."

She looked down at herself. "Oh, sorry. The silk tie keeps coming undone." Lisa shrugged as she tightened the tie. "I've never been too modest. I'd walk around naked if I could. Hope I didn't offend you."

"Not at all. Don't you worry about a thing. As a matter of fact I just might join you one day."

They laughed together. *Beethoven's Ninth* began playing.

"I suppose that's your cell phone," Grams said as she went back to her cooking. "It's been playing that music all morning. I started to pull it out of your purse and tell whoever was calling to please just call later after you had some sleep, but then, I didn't want to intrude on your privacy."

Lisa retrieved her purse which she'd apparently left in the front room the night before, evidence of just how tired she'd been. She pulled out her cell phone and glanced at it. She knew who'd been calling her. All week she hadn't felt equipped to handle him and had ignored his calls. Funny, how suddenly she felt strong and calm. The phone had already gone to message by the time she pulled it from her purse. She opened it. Thirty-eight missed calls, all from Glen. Zero from her mother, which confirmed what Lisa had just recently so cruelly been taught. Her mother couldn't care less about her.

The phone rang again as she held it in her hand. This is ridiculous, she thought, not to mention harassment. She smiled over at her grandmother. "I'm gonna take this outside."

She answered the call as she stepped out onto the porch. "What do you want?"

"Well it's about time. Do you realize you've been gone for almost a week? Where are you?"

Lisa looked back over her shoulder and moved down the porch steps before she spoke to make sure she was not overheard. "That is none of your business." As she moved out into the yard she couldn't help but notice her car sitting in the drive. She smiled her appreciation for Chaz as she walked past it and out across the front lawn, concentrating on what the jerk on the phone was saying.

"You'd better believe it's my business. You have totally screwed up, Lisa. The board was not happy that the new VP didn't even show for her own party. Lou tried to cover the best she could but there is gonna be hell to pay."

She laughed bitterly. "Are you kidding me? *I've* screwed up? Oh, my gosh, are you really that much of an idiot, you... " She let loose a string of foul names.

Undeterred, Glen went on. "Lou is in a rage over you disappearing. She says she'll speak to you once you apologize for making her look bad in front of the board. You've made your point, Lees. It's Wednesday. I suggest you make it in sometime today."

"That's impossible. I won't be in today, Glen."

"Where are you? You're coming in if I have to drag you kicking and screaming."

She laughed. "I don't think you're man enough to do that."

"Lisa, you're really pushing it, now tell me where you are?"

Lisa walked toward the oak tree and balanced on one of the rocks that surrounded it. "It doesn't matter where I am, Glen. Let me see if I can make this clear to you. I won't be in today. I won't be in ever. You and me, we're over. Me and Lou, are over. Consider the VP position vacated, okay? It's all yours. That should make you happy."

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When Chaz walked around to the front yard and saw Lisa standing under the oak tree he was drawn to her like a magnet. She stood on a rock with her back to him, her hair falling loosely to her waist in red ringlets. She wore a flimsy, pink robe that clashed with her hair, which

made it all the more charming. At first, he didn't realize she was on the phone, but as he got closer he couldn't help but overhear the one-sided conversation peppered with language that would make a marine proud.

"I don't care what you tell her. . . Don't you dare threaten me . . . You lost me the moment you decided to go to bed with my mother. . . I don't give a rat's behind about that job . . . The car is mine . . . I don't know what you're trying to pull, but that car is mine. It was a birthday present from mother dearest and I'm not giving it up . . . She owes me much more than a car . . . Let me see if I can help you to understand, Glen. We were supposed to be married. You slept with my mother. My mother, you little pig, and neither one of you is sorry for it. You act as if *I'm* the one who messed up . . . Yeah? Well you can tell her that I hope she burns in hell . . . The car is mine . . . Fine, then, I guess I'll see you in court." She stuffed the phone in the pocket of her robe, spun around and sucked in a startled breath.

"Chaz!"

He stood frozen to the spot. As if what he'd just heard hadn't stunned him enough, what she was wearing almost brought him to his knees. Her robe was open and she wore only a few strips of clothing. His eyes made a slow perusal up her body to her adorable frowning mouth, turned up nose and eyes that at the moment were spitting fire. He swallowed hard, trying to find his voice. He nodded. "Lisa."

She glanced down at her attire and quickly pulled her robe shut, jerking the tie sharply. "What are you doing here?"

He smiled slowly. "I actually work here. Sometimes anyway."

"Work here?"

He shrugged. "Maddie's getting up there in years and she's alone. I make it a point to come over and help her out when I can."

Pressing her lips together, she took a breath, sighed heavily. "I guess I should thank you for taking care of her."

"No need. It's not that big a deal and I get some great meals out of it, besides the pay."

"She pays you?"

Her eyes were back to fire and he realized he was having a great deal of fun getting that temper of hers up.

"Sure. You think I'd work for free?"

"You live up there in that big fancy mansion on the hill and you have the nerve to take money from my grandmother?"

"Well, that big fancy house belongs to my parents. I live about a

quarter mile past on the other side."

Lisa sneered. "Oh, I see. So that makes it all right for you to take money from Grams."

He shrugged. "Well, if I didn't she wouldn't let me help her and if I don't help her she'd try to do everything herself and I have no desire to come over one day and find her laid out with a broken hip or worse. Besides, I put the money away for her for a rainy day."

Lisa's jaw clenched as she thought over his reasoning. She finally sighed. "Okay. So you're a hero."

He grinned. "Did it hurt a lot to say that?"

She didn't bother to answer his question. Lisa stepped down off the rock, and pushed some hair back over her shoulder. She looked up at him, suddenly realizing how much taller he was than her fiancé. Ex-fiancé. She did a quick perusal. Broad shoulders and well-muscled arms would've put any of the body builders at her gym to shame. Eyeing the way his t-shirt tucked into his jeans she imagined there was a rock-hard stomach as well. And about those jeans– riding low on his hips— she had to stop herself. "So, how much did you hear?"

"Hm? Oh, you mean your little conversation there?" he said, gesturing toward her phone. "I heard enough to know you have a darn good reason to be pissed off." He looked down, pushed his hands into his pockets because he desperately wanted to touch her. "Look, I'm sorry. I didn't realize you were on the phone until I got close enough to hear, and then it seemed like a bad idea to interrupt."

She shook her head slowly, sighed. "Don't worry about it. It seems I have no pride left anyway."

"What do you mean?" he asked softly, touched by the honesty of the statement.

She gave a short laugh, shrugged. "A few days ago I cried my eyes out to a bunch of perfect strangers in a restaurant. I mean, my self-esteem is really at an all-time low, you know?"

She looked up at him, her eyes moist, and he fell in love right then and there. This amazingly beautiful creature, with the fire of a dragon and the sweetness of a child had been made to doubt her own self-worth. She'd been hurt. Hurt badly. And she'd come home, searching for solace. They had a lot more in common than she knew. A tiny tear escaped and she hastily brushed it away. Lisa shuddered. "I can't seem to get the image out of my mind. Glen and Lou."

"Lou?"

She laughed bitterly. "My mother. I was never allowed to call her mother. She was Lou to me, and I, apparently, was nothing to her."

"And you caught them together?" he asked quietly.

His voice was gentle which made it too tempting to confide in him. "Red handed." She wrapped her arms around her waist. "It makes me sick every time I think about it. I'm sure they had a good laugh behind my back. Then, what's really crazy is, they couldn't understand why I was so angry. They made me feel so completely foolish and worthless. I'll tell ya, my confidence level has zeroed out. I mean, think about it. I lost the man I was gonna marry to my mother. I was outdone by my own mother. By a forty-two-year-old witch who..."

All thoughts left her. His mouth was on hers, warm, gentle, moving slowly over hers. His large rough hands cupped her face. Her head spun, her heart pounded. She moaned softly. One of his hands moved down to her waist, pulling her closer. Slowly, her mind came back to her and fury began to build. How dare he? She pushed against his chest until he finally let her go.

He stood back, smiling. Her eyes were full of the familiar fire, her mouth swollen from the kiss.

"What do you think you're doing?"

He stepped back, tugged on an errant red curl and gave a careless shrug. "You were doubting your own appeal. I was just helping you to see the light."

Lisa drew in a large breath, Chaz was sure, to let him have a piece of her mind. Lucky for him the screen door opened. "Good morning, Chaz!" Maddie looked toward Lisa. "The two of you come on in now and have some breakfast."

Chaz winked at Lisa before he called back toward Maddie. "We're on our way. I'm starved."

He started toward the house, but stopped and turned back. "Come on, Lisa, a good country breakfast will do you good."

When she didn't move he sighed. "Come on now, you can't be mad at me for kissing you. You were too much for me to resist."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh, pullease."

He grabbed her hand and pulled her along. "So, you're still not convinced of your appeal? Well, then, I believe I'm gonna have to make it my mission."

"You pawin' at me is the last thing I need." Lisa jerked her hand away from him and stormed ahead of him up the front steps.

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"Miss Maddie, you are gonna make me fat," Chaz said, pushing back from the table.

Maddie blushed. "Oh, poo boy, there's not an ounce of fat on your body."

Maddie stood to clear the dishes but Lisa jumped in readily. "Please, let me do the dishes." Before Grams could protest Lisa insisted. "It's the least I could do and it will make me feel useful."

Grams conceded and sat down for a second cup of coffee. Her sharp eyes didn't miss the way Chaz' eyes followed her granddaughter around the kitchen. She smiled. Now wouldn't that be nice, she thought.

Chaz watched the red-headed nymph move about the kitchen, her silk robe swishing around her. His mind wandered to the kiss they'd shared earlier and his pulse quickened. He didn't know what had come over him. One minute he'd been watching her mouth form words and the next, he'd lost all control. With her temper, he was surprised she hadn't taken off his head. Whatever the punishment, it would have been worth it. The truth of the matter was, she had his interest, and that was more than he'd felt about anyone in three years. Three years since his heart had been ripped out of his chest.

He pushed the thought away, and concentrated on Lisa's hips swaying gently under the flimsy robe. He glanced over at Miss Maddie who was grinning at him. He felt his face turn red, then shrugged and winked at her. "So, Miss Maddie, are you and me still on for Friday night?"

"Oh, yes, of course, Chaz. I'm expected to bring my peach cobbler and you know I just couldn't let everyone down."

"We'd be devastated." He looked up at Lisa. "How about it, Lisa? Would you like to join us at the *Pine Forest Community Church Spring Social and Dance*?"

She finished rinsing a dish and placed it neatly in the drainer, surveying her work with a smile before she turned to face Chaz. "A church dance? Um, I'm not sure if I'm the sort of person you'd like to take to a church dance."

"And just what sort of person should I take?" Chaz asked.

She shrugged. "You know, some sweet, demure girl, with dimples and a knack for crafts and baking chocolate cakes."

He chuckled. "Well what fun would that be? Come on, Red, I'd

much rather take a hellion with a tongue like a razor and a knack for getting into trouble."

"Chaz!" Maddie said sternly. "I'd prefer you not call my sweet little Lisa a hellion."

"Oh, sorry Miss Maddie," he said smiling broadly. "I don't know what came over me."

"Well, you behave yourself." Maddie looked up at Lisa with a sweet smile. "Please come, Lisa. It would make me so happy to introduce you to all my friends."

"Well then, if it would make you happy, Grams, of course I'll come." She glanced at Chaz who appeared extremely pleased with himself. She frowned at him before turning back to finish cleaning the kitchen. A Polaroid picture held by a magnet on the front of the refrigerator caught her eye. She stopped, taking the picture out from under the magnet and looked at it closely.

"That's you, dear," Maddie said. "You were ten years old. It was the last time I saw you."

Lisa looked closely at the photo. She saw a tall, skinny kid with pigtails, smiling at the camera. The girl in the photo was at that gangly, awkward stage. Lisa could remember feeling troubled about her looks, yet, more than that, she'd felt alone. She looked up at her grandmother. "I just barely remember that trip and I sure don't remember posing for this picture. Was it you who took it?"

Grams smiled, nodded. "With my old Polaroid camera."

Lisa didn't return the smile. "Ten years old, it seems I should remember more. I know I stayed a night or two. Where was Lou?"

Maddie stood, began pushing in chairs. "Your mother dropped you off and went into town. You were here three days before she came back and took you away."

Lisa bit her lip to keep it from trembling, then shrugged, forced a smile as she placed the picture back in its place. "I don't really remember, but last Friday, when my life went sour, I seemed to naturally point the car in this direction. After speaking with some people about what I should do, it seemed all I could think about was I had to find my way back here."

Maddie took Lisa's hands in hers. "Well, dear, whatever happened, I couldn't be more grateful, because it brought you back to me." She reached up and brushed a strand of hair out of Lisa's face. "Do you want to talk about it yet? I mean, about what happened that made you

come looking for me?"

Lisa's eyes met Chaz' before she turned them to her grandmother. She shook her head. "I don't want to talk about the past anymore. What's done is done, right?"

"That's right, Lisa. The most important thing is, you're home."

Lisa nodded, as a lovely, warm feeling bloomed in her heart. "Home. That sounded so nice."

"Well, now, since the dishes are all taken care of, I have to get out to the garden and get it ready for planting."

"Just give me a minute to run up and get dressed and I'll be right out to help, Grams," Lisa said, moving toward the stairs.

"No."

"Excuse me?" Both Grams and Lisa asked in unison.

Chaz rose, and pushed in his chair. "I said, 'no'. Miss Maddie, it's not that I don't want you to have help in the garden and I'll come help you myself— tomorrow, but ya see, Red here had a bit of an accident yesterday."

"Oh, yes, that's right. In all the excitement I remember you saying something ridiculous about some vicious cows. I thought you were just playing around."

Lisa frowned. "I'm just fine, Grams. I'll be out in a minute."

"Actually, she's not just fine. She hurt some ribs. They're definitely bruised. Maybe broken. She needs x-rays."

"Absolutely not," Lisa snarled.

Chaz continued speaking to Maddie as if Lisa hadn't spoken. "And I'm more concerned about her head than her ribs. She was knocked unconscious yesterday and threw up afterward. I told her she needs to go to the emergency room, but she won't listen. And since she refuses that, she should at least take it easy for a week or two to make sure she doesn't do any further damage to her head or ribs."

"Oh, dear, Lisa honey, I think you need to do what Chaz says. He knows what he's talking about. Are you in any pain?"

Lisa glared at Chaz.

"That would be a yes," Chaz answered for her with a grin.

"Will you just shut-up?"

"Now, Lisa, maybe you should let Chaz take a look to see if you really might need x-rays." When Lisa looked like she might refuse, Maddie jumped in quickly. "Please, hon. It would make me feel so much better." She took Lisa's hand and pulled her into the front room.

"Here now, you just lie down on the couch and we'll get Chaz to take a look and see what he thinks. Okay?"

Chaz blanched. He hadn't meant for it to go that far. He'd only wanted her to take it easy. "Um, it's okay, Miss Maddie. She's not dressed and I already looked at it yesterday."

"Nonsense. You're a doctor." Maddie patted the sofa. "Now, just lie here, Lisa and let Chaz take a look at those ribs."

Lisa smiled slyly, noticing Chaz' discomfort. She untied her robe and lay provocatively on the couch, her hands above her head.

Chaz swallowed hard. His eyes moved up her body to meet the challenge in her eyes. As Maddie peered over Chaz' shoulder, he lifted Lisa's shirt under her arm, sighing heavily. He uncovered a deep purplish, blue bruise about the size of a piece of bread. "There doesn't seem to be any swelling." He pressed on it, looked into her eyes. Took a moment before he could speak. "Does that hurt at all?"

She couldn't take her eyes from his. "Um, a little. Not as much as it did yesterday."

Lisa bit her lip. His hand moved gently over the area. She thought of those same calloused hands that held her face a little earlier. She forced the image away, reproving herself for it. Was she really so needy? She knew one thing, Glen, at his best, had never made her feel the things Chaz had stirred in her in less than a twenty-four hour period.

"Oh, my, that's quite a bruise, Lisa. Are you sure you won't go get some x-rays?"

"I'm sure."

"Oh dear, Chaz, what do you think?" Maddie asked.

"I'm thinking they may not be broken. Still, she needs to let them heal at least for a day or two."

"Well there you have it, Lisa. You won't mind will you dear? Think of it as a little vacation."

Lisa sighed. "Fine, but only for a few days." Still, her eyes told Chaz she would be getting even soon.

Chaz cleared his throat. "Well, I've gotta get going. I'll stop by later to see if you need anything."

"That's fine, dear." Grams smiled sweetly. "Well, I have work to do." She headed toward the kitchen door. Lisa stood and tied her robe as the back door swung shut.

Lisa's eyebrows rose haughtily at Chaz. "I believe you said you

were leaving."

"I did. I am." He blew out a breath. "Red, you've gotta stop taking your clothes off in front of me."

"Oh," she cooed softly. "But you're a doctor."

He sighed. "Okay, I let her believe that so she'll listen to me when I tell her she needs a checkup. It was my mother's idea. She's a doctor. A real doctor. A cardiologist. After Lawrence died she worried about Maddie and since I had the opportunity to see her more than anyone else, we sort of played it that way."

"Who's Lawrence?"

"Your grandfather."

"Oh." Her face reddened.

Placing his hands on her shoulders he turned her toward him. "Look, I don't mean any harm by misleading Miss Maddie. I think she really knows the truth anyway. We just sort of play the game."

She heaved a sigh. "I suppose I believe you."

He nodded. "Good, but back to my original statement. You gotta stop taking your clothes off in front of me."

"And why is that?" she asked, batting her eyes.

"Because— I'm *not* a doctor— and I'm *not* a saint."

She grinned as she sashayed up the steps to dress and looked back over her shoulder. "Don't worry, Chaz, if you lose control and try to take advantage of me I can handle myself."

He watched her leave. "Oh, I'm sure of that," he mumbled.

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Chaz looked up as his father ambled slowly into the stable. He nodded. "Mornin' Dad."

His father nodded back. "Mornin' Son."

"How's the back?"

"It hurts," his father answered grumpily.

"Well, maybe you shouldn't be riding today, ya think?"

"Don't get smart with me. I can still whip your butt."

Chaz laughed. "Yes, sir," he said as he reached under Beebe to tighten the cinch.

His father eyed him. "I hear there was a bit of a problem moving the herd yesterday."

"Minor problem."

"And I heard that problem is Maddie's granddaughter."

"You heard right." Chaz answered. He wasn't surprised at all that

the news had traveled.

"Heard she's a real looker."

"Right again."

"She was hurt?"

He nodded. "Well, she got caught in the middle of the herd. Knocked her unconscious. Bruised ribs and a few other scrapes and bumps. She'll do." Rising, he took the saddle from his father's hands and swung it over the back of the black gelding.

His father folded his arms across his chest while Chaz finished saddling the horse for him. "So, son, I heard that you actually took care of her."

Chaz's lips pressed into a straight line. He had to draw a deep breath. His hands began to shake, but he concentrated on saddling the horse. "I, uh, did what needed to be done."

His father touched his shoulder. "I'm proud of you."

Chaz didn't turn around. "It was nothing."

Charles let it go. He didn't want to push. His son had been through enough. "How long is she here for?"

"Maddie says she's come home to stay."

His father raised his eyebrows at that. "Well now, do ya think Joe knows by now?"

"It's possible. I was thinking I'll go in tonight and let him know."

Charles grunted in pain as he hauled himself up onto the horse. "Well then, son, I may come along with you."

Chaz nodded. "I'll look forward to it." He watched his father adjust the stirrups. "So, does Mom know you're up in the saddle?"

"I'm just gonna walk him. I had to get out. This back thing is making me crazy."

Chaz smiled as he mounted. "I guess that would be a 'no'."

"See that it stays that way. Now you've got work to do, so get."

Chaz saluted. "Yes, sir. I'm on my way." He snapped the reins and was gone.

⌂⌂⌂

Lisa spent the day doing odds and ends. Washing her clothes. Arranging her room. Wandering through the large farmhouse. It was large and worn, but it was immaculate. It boasted eleven large bedrooms and one small bedroom, a front room, a den, a library and a dining room that would seat thirty easily. There were gorgeous hardwood floors throughout, that would cost a fortune nowadays.

These floors though, were old and definitely needed refinishing, but Lisa could see their beauty. Lisa's "green room" along with four others looked out over the back. Five more across the hall faced the front. Maddie occupied a large bedroom on the main floor close to the kitchen and there was a smaller bedroom down a hallway toward the north end of the house.

The huge kitchen could use updating, Lisa thought. Which gave her a marvelous idea. She ran to grab pen and paper and soon Lisa had started making lists of things she could do to make her grandmother's life easier. Something, Lisa thought bitterly, Lou should have done a long time ago. A dishwasher, a new oven. Heck, new appliances everywhere. Update the lighting. Definitely new countertops and back splash. A modern kitchen island, but one at a good height for Grams. And just have to do the kitchen floors, maybe stone. Oh, yes, stone. And of course, restore the fireplace.

She'd had to smile as she inventoried the bedrooms. Each one had its own little color theme. It was really cute, but old-fashioned. She'd bet some of the wallpaper was more than twenty years old. The paper in one room was yellow flowers, in another, pink rosebuds, another, blue butterflies. Her room boasted green ivy. She'd definitely have to tear out all the wallpaper and paint. Maybe uncover the original beams that ran the length of the house.

The furniture looked to be quality, some real antiques, but she could bring in a dresser here, a desk there. New beds. Some storage chests. New linens. She grinned. Oh, what fun this is gonna be! She wouldn't spring it on Grams right away. She'd wait until she thought Grams was used to her enough to accept her help.

She smiled as she thought of the woman. She was a tiny lady, like Lou, but with a head full of beautiful white hair. Lisa wasn't sure of her age, but calculated she was in her mid sixties. The lady was love and kindness personified. Almost too good to be true. So the question begged to be asked, with a mother so sweet, how in the world did Louise Lewis turn out to be the nasty person that she was?

Lisa sighed. She really needed to stop thinking about her mother. She needed to get her out of her head, and her heart. Grams was napping. Maybe Lisa would take a nice turn around the property.

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Darn it, he couldn't stay away. He was acting like some foolish school boy, like some dog on the scent. He'd told them he would check

back later. He could have phoned, but that was no fun when he could get an eyeful instead.

He spotted Lisa immediately as he drove through the gate. She was walking in the pecan grove. She wore blue jeans and a white blouse. Her hair was braided in one long braid that came slightly past her waist. She was looking up through the trees like a beautiful wood sprite. He smiled and waved and she waved back. He unloaded some groceries onto the front porch and headed out to see her.

"Hey," he said as he approached. Stray red hairs billowed out around her face and her green eyes shone with pleasure. She literally took his breath away.

"Hi."

"Where's Maddie?"

"She's napping."

"Good. She's been a little under the weather lately."

"Really? She seems to be healthy as a horse."

"Normally, she is, but it's only been two weeks ago that she was in the hospital. Chest pains, nausea, vomiting, dizzy. The doctors never did figure out what was wrong. After a few days of tests she seemed better and they sent her home."

"Just two weeks ago?"

"About. Why?"

"I was just thinking that I'm glad she's okay. I mean, if she'd died, I never would have been able to meet her, to know her. She's such a wonderful person."

"She really is just the best," Chaz agreed. "Well, other than my own parents."

Lisa smiled. "Must be nice."

"Oh, sorry, Lisa. That was pretty insensitive of me."

She shook her head. "No, really, it's okay. I'm certainly not gonna sit around and 'cry woe is me' over my mother. I do wish, however, that I could have known my father. It makes me feel sort of lost, you know?"

She looked up at Chaz as she spoke. He had a look of incredulity on his face. "What?" she asked.

"You don't know who your father is?"

She shook her head. "Lou refused to talk about him. The only thing she told me was she'd run away from home and met him on the road. It was a one-night stand," she said with a sigh.

"Well, son of a... "

"What?"

He'd never met Louise Lewis, but he was beginning to hate her just the same. This girl had a right to know who her father was. How could that woman deny her own daughter at least that? Well, he could and would remedy the situation right now.

Lisa touched his shoulder. "What is it, Chaz?"

"Honey, come here." Taking her hand he led her across the grove to the terrace garden he'd been working on. "Sit down. I have something I need to tell you."

She sat on the edge of a crosstie, her feet dangling above the ground. Chaz ran a hand through his blond hair, pushing it back away from his face. "Lisa, we all know who your father is."

"What? What are you talking about? We who?"

"We everyone. Lisa, everyone in this town knows that Louise Lewis and Joe Carter were juniors in high school when they got pregnant. They know that he wanted to marry your mom, but she refused and she took off. Honey, your mom and dad grew up in this town. They went to school together."

He'd expected her to tear up, to make a big scene, but her face was void of emotion and extremely pale. She opened her mouth to speak, but closed it again.

She tried again. "But..." Again, nothing came out.

He touched her chin gently with his finger and tilted her face up so he could see her better. "Lisa? You okay?"

And then there was fire. A string of profanity emphasized the words that spilled out. "So, that horrible, vicious, hateful, evil mother of mine lied to me all these years. Ugh, why should I be so surprised? All this time, I might have been able to find him, to track him down. Of course, that was what she wanted to avoid. Because she owned me. To her, I was nothing but her property and she wasn't gonna let anyone else claim what was hers."

Chaz had to bite his lip to keep from smiling, because her use of colorful language was hilariously entertaining to him. Such ugly words coming from such a sweet mouth.

Lisa however, wasn't thinking about her words. Her brain was moving fast and realization struck her. She looked up at Chaz, her eyes wide with hope. "So, if my father grew up right here in *Pine Forest*, then someone here probably knows where he is, right? That means I

might actually be able to meet my father. Unless, he doesn't *want* to meet me. Which wouldn't surprise..."

"Lisa," he said sternly enough to make her stop abruptly. She stared at him with luminous green eyes. "Lisa, your father lives in town. He owns *Joe's Family Bar and Grill*."

Her chin trembled. "Joe. His name is Joe?"

"Yes, as I said a moment ago, his name is Joe Carter."

She stood and walked a few steps away and turned back abruptly. "Do you know him?"

"Yes. Everyone knows Joe. He's a good man, Lisa."

She nodded. "A good man," she whispered hoarsely.

Finally, the tears came. She looked away, so he wouldn't see, but it was hard to miss with all the sniffling and hitching of breath and it tore him up.

"Lisa." He took her by the shoulders. "Lisa, oh, honey."

She turned and fell against his chest and his arms came snugly around her. "Okay now," he whispered softly. "Shhh, you're okay. It's gonna be okay."

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Jeremiah 17:10

"I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve."

Chapter 5

Joe Carter looked up as Charlie Stewart and his son Chaz walked in. He gave a friendly nod. "Charlie, Chaz. Whaddya have?"

"Hey, Joe," Charlie said. "How about a cold one. The usual."

"You got it. Chaz?"

He smiled. "Well, I'm takin' a stand against Bud in honor of all the real women I know and love, so, you got anything local, preferably an IPA?"

"Let's see now, I just got somethin' new in from *Line Creek Brewery* called *First Crush*."

"I'll have that, and a..."

"Let me guess," Joe laughed. "A pepperoni pizza."

Chaz grinned. "You know me too well."

As Joe turned to pull a beer for his father, Chaz looked the man over. He figured him to be maybe six-one, six-two, a few inches shorter than Chaz himself. He kept his red hair cut short, but still, you could tell it was bright red. Chaz tried to see the color of his eyes. They could be green, though it was hard to tell in the dim light. Still, it was fairly easy to tell that Lisa was Joe's daughter.

"Hey, Chaz."

He turned to see Josh and Troy over at the pool tables. Grabbing the bottle Joe placed in front of him, he joined his friends.

"Hey, guys. Where's Evan?"

"Hot date."

Chaz's eyebrows raised. "Anyone I know?"

"Yes indeed," Josh said. "That would be Andrea. She came sniffing around him, flirtin' and stuff, and Evan asked her out on a whim and practically had a heart attack when she said 'yes'."

Chaz frowned. What was that little hellcat up to now? Her claws were sharp. During the time he'd spent with her she'd done nothing but bad-mouth his friends. He hoped Evan wasn't in over his head.

"What ya lookin' so worried about, Chaz?" Troy asked. "She'll be okay. Besides, I thought you didn't want anything to do with her."

"I didn't. I don't. And it's not her I'm worried about."

They laughed at that.

Chaz looked back toward the bar where his father chatted with Joe. "So, does Joe know yet that his daughter is here in Pine Forest?"

Josh shook his head. "I don't think so. I'm sure there's a lot of people who were hoping to be the first to tell him, but he left yesterday for Athens to pick up Megan from college. They just got back a few hours ago. I thought about sayin' something, but thought it might be better coming from Maddie."

Megan, Chaz thought. Lisa has a half sister she doesn't even know about. And a step mother, Shirley, Joe's wife. He hadn't thought about them. Hadn't thought to tell Lisa about them. Probably for the best. A body can only handle so much at one time.

"So, is that why you and your dad are here? To break the news?"

Chaz nodded. "Yes, because Lisa's coming to the social Friday night and Dad thought we should make sure it gets done now because we wouldn't want them accidentally running into each other without a clue. That wouldn't be fair to either of them."

"So I guess she's coming to the social with you?" Josh asked, emphasizing the word "you."

Chaz's eyes met his in challenge before he recognized the teasing nature of the question. "I promised Maddie a long time ago I'd get her to the church on Friday. I can't very well leave Lisa behind can I?"

"Oh, absolutely not," Josh laughed. "We certainly can't let that happen, now can we?"

"I'll tell ya, Chaz," Troy said, shaking his head, "that Lisa Lewis is one fine lookin' woman."

Chaz's eyes narrowed. He tried not to let the words ruffle his feathers. He didn't want to make a big deal of it. He didn't want anyone to know he actually had any kind of feelings for the girl, that when he thought of her his insides got all twisted up inside. It was crazy. He'd only known her a day and a half, but darn if she didn't get to him. If anyone knew how he felt, they would make a big deal about it, go overboard encouraging him, be all excited that she's the first woman he's shown an interest in since the accident.

"Hey, Chaz!"

He turned to a group of giggling high school girls sliding into a booth. He smiled, waved back.

"Heeey Chaaaaz," Troy mocked. "Man oh man, Chaz. You know you could have your pick of any one of those sweet young things."

Chaz laughed. "I think that's called pedophilia. Troy, I know you think you're still eighteen, but you need to remember there's another ten years added to that. Me and you, same graduating class, buddy."

"Man, you're ruining my fantasies."

"I'm sure you'll come up with more, you degenerate." He looked toward the bar. "Well, I guess I'd better get this over with. Gotta get home and get some sleep. Besides everything else I've committed myself to, I'm running fences in the morning."

He left them to join his father. Joe placed a pizza in front of him as he sat.

"Thanks," Chaz said, grabbing a slice and stuffing it in his mouth with a sigh.

Joe nodded, looking from father to son. "So, to what do I owe this honor?"

"Honor?" Charles asked.

"Yeah. What brings two of the Stewart men to my place on a Wednesday night?"

Chaz was never one to beat around the bush, so he just came out with it as he devoured another piece of pizza. "Actually, Joe, we came to give you some news."

"News, huh? Well I hope it's good news. Usually everyone comes in here to tell me their troubles."

"It is good news, Joe. It's about your daughter."

"My daughter? Heck now, she's only been home a few hours. What's she gone and done now?"

Charlie stepped in. "We're not talking about Megan. We're talking about Lisa."

Joe's face paled. "What do you know about Lisa? Has something happened to her?"

"No. She's fine. We wanted to let you know that she's in town."

"How do you— oh wow, is she at Maddie's?"

Chaz nodded.

Joe stood silently as the information made its way into his brain. He turned away. When he turned back he had a look of determination on his face. "Is Louise here too?"

"No," Chaz said. "Apparently Lisa and her mom are on the outs. I'll leave it up to Lisa to tell you about that. They had it out and Lisa came here looking for Maddie."

"So she drove her own daughter away. Have you seen her?"

"Yeah, she walked into the middle of my cattle crossing."

"What? Was she hurt?" Joe asked anxiously.

"Not enough to keep her from cussing me out for letting my killer cows attack her."

Joe smiled. "Oh, then she's feisty, huh?"

"To say the least," Chaz remarked with a smile.

"Did she mention me? Does she want to see me?"

"Joe, I had an interesting conversation with her this afternoon. She didn't know who you were. She didn't even know you lived here. She'd been told that her father was a one-night stand Louise had run into after she'd left Pine Forest."

Joe contemplated the information for a moment. He looked up sadly. "So, that means Lisa doesn't know about me at all. Doesn't even know my name. She never tried to find me, to contact me, because she didn't even know about me."

The pain on his face was hard to miss, nevertheless that brought Chaz to the question that he wanted answered. "So, why didn't you try to contact her?"

Joe looked up slowly, realizing he was being reprimanded by a man fifteen years his junior, taken to task by a man who'd probably still been in diapers when Louise took off. Joe's face darkened. "You're walking on thin ice, son."

Chaz looked him straight in the eye. "I realize that, sir, but the question had to be asked. I don't mean any disrespect."

Joe nodded, respecting Chaz asking him a hard question man to man. Joe turned to Charlie who being ten years older than Joe would remember the circumstances. "Charlie, you know how it was when she left. It took me years to track her down. I'd get the information about where she was and I'd arrive to find I missed her by a week, or once it was by two days. As Megan grew and needed me, it got harder and harder to look for Lisa. I admit, I finally gave up. I was in debt up to my eyeballs trying to track her down, but she's never been out of my thoughts. Never. Louise moved from one mark to the next, one man to the next. Pretty awful way for my little girl to grow up."

"Yeah, pretty bad," Chaz agreed. "When she told me she didn't even know who her father was, I told her about you," Chaz said as he pushed the empty pan away and grabbed his beer.

"How'd she take it?"

"After the initial shock she was pretty excited about meeting you.

She's coming to the social Friday night. She said it would be nice to see you there. Thought maybe with a bunch of people around, it wouldn't seem so uncomfortable, she wouldn't have to think of things to talk about. Then, if you still wanted to know her, the two of you could get together."

Joe shook his head. "If I still want to know her? How could she think otherwise?"

"Well, her mom did a number on her, Joe. Messed her up."

Joe sighed. "So much time has been lost."

Charlie nodded. "Well, that's spilled milk now, isn't it? All you can do is make up for lost time."

Joe nodded. "Right." He grinned. "Oh, man oh man, I'm gonna meet my daughter!" He offered his hand. "Thanks for coming in, guys. Really. But Chaz, I was just thinking, you seem to know an awful lot about Lisa."

Chaz chuckled. "Yeah, I do, don't I? But I really don't. We've had a few conversations. She broke down a few times and kinda spilled her guts and I happened to be the one that got spilled on. She's had a rough time, but I'm thinking that finding her father is gonna go a long way toward making everything better. I'll leave it at that and let her tell you everything else."

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On Friday morning, Lisa made her way downstairs, turned right and headed straight to the kitchen. "Mmmm, wow, something smells wonderful— again."

Maddie clapped her hands together. "Oh, I just love it when people say that. It sings to my heart. I guess that's because cooking is my heart." She went to Lisa and gave her a giant hug. "Good morning! My, don't you look pretty today."

"Thanks," Lisa said with a smile, happily wondering if every morning would begin with a hug and a cheerful 'good morning.' "I picked it up on my big adventure to Macon Mall yesterday. The shorts were on sale and the blouse looked so fresh and feminine and country, with all the tiny rosebuds, I just couldn't resist."

Maddie headed back toward her stove. "Well, I'm so glad you enjoyed yourself."

"And I also couldn't resist this," Lisa said, nervously holding her gift out toward Maddie.

Maddie turned. "Oh! You bought something for me?"

Lisa held out a bright red apron with words "Head Chef" emblazoned on the front. "It's no big deal. I saw it and thought you might like it."

"Why it certainly is a big deal and I love it." She accepted the apron lovingly and tried it on. She turned in a circle. "Oh, it's just perfect." She reached up to plant a kiss on Lisa's cheek.

Lisa could feel her face flush. This was a lovely feeling, she decided. The only time she'd ever given a gift to Lou was back in kindergarten. The memory was still clear as a bell. She'd made a Mother's Day card at school. She'd been so careful to form each word perfectly, knowing how Lou demanded perfection, even from a five-year-old. When she'd given it to her mother, she'd been laughed at, and the card was used that day as a coaster for Lou's drink. Lisa swore she would never put herself in that position again, and she hadn't. Not until Glen. How could she have known that getting engaged to Glen would give her mother the opportunity to hurt her once more? Her mother had found a way to make her feel small and worthless all over again.

Maddie turned back to finish breakfast just as Lisa heard the sound of tires crunching on gravel. Her heart raced. She admitted, she looked forward to seeing Chaz again. He was an eye-catching specimen of a male. Rough and rugged. Tall and well-muscled. The memory of his kiss two days ago lingered in her mind and on her lips, uninvited as it may have been. She headed toward the front door with a smile on her face, but when she opened the door her smile faded.

Glen was reaching inside of a Lyft, retrieving two pieces of luggage. She stepped out onto the porch and closed the door behind her. "What are you doing here?"

Glen waved at the driver as he drove away. "Nice guy. Typical southerner though."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Stupid. I haven't met a southerner yet who wasn't a dumb hick."

"Glen, you are a pompous, arrogant moron. I'm not going back and," she pointed to his luggage. "You're certainly not staying here."

He turned with a pleasant smile. "You're right. I'm not." Pulling a set of keys out of his pocket, he pointed them at the red Corvette. The car beeped and the doors unlocked.

Lisa rushed down the steps. "What are you doing? Where did you get those keys?"

He shook his head. "I think that southern thing has already rubbed off on you. Come on, Lees, use your brain."

He lifted his luggage and headed around toward the passenger side of the car.

She ran after him. "You are not taking my car."

"On the contrary, I am. Besides, it's not your car."

"It is mine and you're not taking it." She planted herself in front of the door.

Standing calmly, he eyed her. "Look, don't make me hurt you. Even though after what you did last Friday, I owe you. Now move."

"Go to hell."

Sighing, he set the luggage down and grabbed her by the wrists. She gasped as he swung her around and threw her onto the gravel drive. Before she could rise he had the door open and the luggage thrown in. As he headed for the driver's side Lisa jumped up and opened the passenger door, grabbed a suitcase and flung it as far as she could.

"Stop it, Lisa." He ran around to her as she tried to pull the second case from the car. Grabbing her from behind around the waist he carried her kicking and cursing toward the house and dumped her unceremoniously on the steps. He hurried to gather his bag.

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Chaz pulled out his cell phone. "Good morning, Miss Maddie. And how are you doin' this bright, sunny day?"

"Oh, dear, Chaz, where are you?"

"Actually, Beebe and I are on your property down by the creek. I was looking for some nice stones to use on your terrace garden, so I think I'll..."

"Chaz, we've got trouble. There's a man. Just come. Hurry."

"I'm on my way." Gathering the reins he threw himself onto Beebe's back and kicked her sides. Leaning forward he talked to the chestnut mare. "Come on, girl, give it all you got. We've got at least a mile to cover."

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Lisa charged Glen before he could get to the bag she'd thrown into the drive. Deciding to go for the keys in his hand, she gripped his arm, lowered her head and bit into his thumb. He let go of the keys. She grabbed them and took off but he caught her easily. He wrestled her down to the ground and tried prying her hand open. "Let go of the keys,

Lisa."

"No."

He slapped her.

"You leave her alone!"

Glen looked up to see a tiny lady coming down the porch steps, rolling pin held high in the air. He rose and planted his foot across Lisa's arm and waited for the old bat to get near enough. As she did, he grabbed the rolling pin and tossed it across the front yard, keeping his foot on Lisa's arm.

"Grams," Lisa screamed from where she was pinned to the driveway. "Go in the house. You get inside right now!"

Glen ground his foot against Lisa's arm until she cried out. Then quickly, he bent down and grabbed the keys from her weakened hand. He started again to gather his bag from the drive when Lisa lunged at him. This time he grabbed her by the shoulders and shoved. She fell, her head snapping back. Stunned, she struggled to get her feet under her. He used the time to gather his bag and toss it back into the car.

He was headed to get in the driver's side door when Lisa gave a last-ditch effort. Jumping on his back, she tried to put a choke hold on him, but he'd had enough. He turned and slammed her against the side of the car. Once, twice. Her hold loosened and she slid down, yet she wasn't quite ready to quit just yet, but when she reached for him again he grabbed her, held her out away from him and backhanded her with all his might.

Lisa flew backward, landing on her backside just behind the car.

"Stupid little girl," he spat. "I owed you that." He jumped into the car, marveling at how good it felt to hit her, and was realizing he wanted to do it again, but there was no time. Maybe he'd make arrangements to come back sometime, take care of it properly. She'd made him look like a fool, pulling a gun on him. Breaking off their engagement. Bloodying his nose. Oh, yes, he thought, he'd definitely have to schedule some time to make her hurt.

While Lisa struggled to sit up, the engine roared to life. He threw the car in gear and took off, spewing rocks and gravel in his wake.

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Chaz raced toward the house. He could see Lisa out by the car fighting with a man. He saw her jump on his back. Saw him slam her against the car. Saw him hit her. Saw red. Wanted to kill. Two seconds after the car pulled away, Chaz threw himself from Beebe's back and

landed next to Lisa where she sat on the drive. Before he knelt to see to her, he pulled out his cell, spoke into it briefly and pocketed it.

Squatting down, he peered at Lisa's face. There were no tears. She seemed extremely calm. Maddie leaned over from the other side. Slowly, Lisa looked up at Chaz.

"He took my car."

"I see that," Chaz said gently. "He won't get out of the county. I've notified the sheriff's department."

"It's *my* car," she insisted.

"Uh, huh."

"I hate that son-of-a... Oh, sorry, Grams."

"What say, we get you inside?" Chaz asked.

"No. I think I'll just sit here a little while."

"But, Lisa," Maddie said. "You're bleeding."

She looked slowly up at her grandmother. "I am?" Raising a trembling hand to her head she brought it down covered with blood. Blankly, she looked toward Chaz. "I'm bleeding, Doc."

Recognizing the symptoms of shock, he scooped her up into his arms. "Yes, you are. We'll just go inside and fix you up."

He carried her into the kitchen and placed her gently onto the kitchen work table so that her head would be closer to eye level for him. For just a second he had a flash of another scene. Another head covered in blood. His hands shook and he swallowed hard. Drawing a deep breath, he got himself under control.

Maddie rushed around, gathering clean towels and a basin of warm water. She placed those next to Lisa on the table. "I'll go find some antiseptic," she announced.

Chaz leaned over to examine her head, moving closer. Heat sprang up between them. His eyes met hers. She was smiling. So, she wasn't as bad off as he'd thought. He smiled back at her, his heart racing. Keeping his eyes on hers he dropped his hands to rest on her knees. It took all the willpower he had to go back to examining the cuts on her head. He wet a towel and began to wipe the blood away, finding one cut on her forehead right at the hairline and two smaller ones a little closer to her temple.

Maddie came rushing in. "I can't seem to find any antiseptic. How is she?"

"Found three cuts on her forehead. Probably from the rocks that hit her when the car took off. One is pretty deep but I think we can go with

a butterfly bandage instead of stitches. I'm gonna need some supplies, though, so, Miss Maddie, what happened to the first aid kit I gave you last October?"

"Oh, dear, what did I do with that?" She paced a few steps. "Oh! I think it's in my closet upstairs. I'll be right back."

Chaz rinsed out the towel and began wiping dirt and blood from Lisa's cheek. He worked slowly and gently. His eyes roamed over her. Her face was tilted up toward him. Her eyes were closed as if in a trance. Her breaths were short but steady. Her lips were parted. He couldn't resist. He bent and touched his lips gently to hers. Her eyes opened. She didn't move, but watched him as he straightened and then bent again, this time lightly kissing her bottom lip. She licked her lips and he took that as an invitation. Slowly, gently, his mouth closed over hers. He pulled away, realized he'd ended it much too soon and so he went back in, slow and easy, taking, tasting, savoring, immersing himself in her flavor.

He felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. When her hands reached up around his neck his heart pounded in his chest. "Oh, Red," he mumbled as his mouth left hers.

"I finally found it," Maddie announced as she came breathlessly back into the kitchen.

They sprang apart.

"I thought I'd put it in my closet but it was in the bathroom closet. Of course that makes more sense, doesn't it?"

Chaz cleared his throat. "It sure does. Let's see what you've got."

He glanced back at Lisa. Her face was pink with embarrassment, her lips pouty and moist. Her eyes glassy. He hoped that wasn't from shock. It took only a few minutes for Chaz to disinfect and bandage the cuts on Lisa's head. It would take much longer for his heart to slow to a normal rate. It appeared Lisa was having the same difficulty.

He got control and had Lisa hold still while he looked into her eyes. "Lisa, this is the second head injury in just a few days' time. Please humor me. If you don't want to go to the hospital or to a doctor, let me have my mom check you out. She's a doctor."

Lisa sighed and glanced at Maddie who had walked over to the stove. "I'll think about it."

"Well, breakfast was ruined," Maddie lamented. "I suppose we'll just have to make do."

"I'm sure we can scrounge up something," Lisa said.

"You sit and rest."

"Oh, no, not again," Lisa complained.

They began to argue the point when Chaz's cell phone rang. He spoke for several minutes before he ended the call. He looked up to find all eyes on him.

"Well?" Lisa demanded.

He sighed. "Well, it appears the car wasn't in your name."

"Not in my name? How could that be?"

"She never had it put in your name. It had apparently been purchased to be driven by the Vice President of *Golden Hotels*." He raised his eyebrows. "I'm guessing that was you?"

"*Was* being the operative word."

"*Golden Hotels*. Pretty impressive."

Lisa rolled her eyes. "Whatever. So, what you're saying is the car was never really mine?"

"I'm afraid not."

"But, how did he find me?"

"Oh, dear, I think that may have been my fault. You see, Louise called yesterday morning. She acted like she knew you were here. I told her to leave you alone. To let you be happy for once."

Lisa sighed, smiled at her. "It's okay, Grams. Really. If it wasn't my car then it wasn't my car. I think I was so pleased to have it because there was some kind of satisfaction that I had something from her. Something she couldn't take away. But she did, didn't she? And she always will." She sighed in resignation. "I don't really want anything from her anyway."

Chaz gripped Lisa around the waist and lowered her to the floor. "Any dizziness?"

"No, I think I'm okay." She looked over at Maddie. "What about you, Grams? Are you okay?"

Chaz whirled, took Maddie by her shoulders. "He hurt you?"

"Oh, no. That, that, person didn't lay a hand on me, but he threw my rolling pin." She moved toward the door. "I'm gonna have to go look for it."

"I'll help you," Chaz said.

"Me too," Lisa added, chuckling. "You should have seen Grams, waving that rolling pin in the air, like a knight come to save me. Now that it's over, I can say, it was pretty comical."

Chaz sighed. "I wish I'd been here to see it. I wish I'd been here

to help. Legally, he may have still been able to get the car, but not before I'd kicked his butt."

Lisa smiled. "And I would've loved to see that." They headed for the front yard.

"Oh, Lisa," Maddie lamented. "Just look at your new clothes."

Lisa looked down to find blood all over her shorts and blouse. She sighed. "That's the second outfit since Tuesday I've ruined with blood. I guess I'll have to do some more shopping, but I can't, can I? I have no transportation, and I left my laptop at the office in LA. Grams, you don't happen to have a computer hidden around here somewhere?"

Grams smiled. "No, dear, but ya know, I've always wanted to learn how to use one."

Lisa smiled. "Cool. I'll have to fix you up with that," Lisa said, mentally adding it to her list of things to do for her grandmother. She turned to Chaz who was lifting the rolling pin out of a bed of begonias. "So, Chaz, do you think I can talk you into giving me a ride into Macon to buy a car?"

"Can't get away until next week, but I definitely think we can strike some kind of bargain," Chaz said with a gleam in his eye.

Lisa started giggling.

"What's so funny?" Chaz asked.

"The gas gauge in the car is messed up. It registers a quarter tank when it's empty, so, Glen's gonna run out of gas." She laughed again. "And he's a slow learner, so it will happen at least twice."

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Marcus lowered the binoculars, tucked them away in his saddlebag. Well now, that was quite a scene, he thought. I wonder who the dude is that took the car. And I wonder just how close Chaz is to Joe's long-lost daughter. Couldn't be that close since she's only been here three days. Who would've guessed Joe's daughter would be such a looker? Looks like I'm gonna have to put in a claim. No way will I stand aside for that overgrown cowboy.

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Luke 12:2

"For nothing is covered up that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known."

Chapter 6

Critically, Lisa looked herself over in the mirror that hung on the back of her bedroom door. She didn't really know what to wear to a town social. She'd bought a blue jean skirt and a pair of cowboy boots during her shopping trip Thursday, thinking they'd be perfect for a little country social. Along with the white, eyelet lace camisole top, it fit her version of country girl. Now that she saw the result in the mirror she was having second thoughts, after all, it was being held at a church, not a bar.

Was the skirt too tight? Or maybe too short? Did the blouse show too much cleavage? Did she look like a country girl or floozy? She simply had no experience in this sort of thing. She knew how to dress to the hilt for a cocktail party, but didn't think a slinky black dress with spiked heels was the thing here. She knew how to dress for success at the office. Knew how to dress for a Laker game, a shopping trip down Rodeo Drive, a yacht party, but "country church social, dinner, and dance" was out of her realm of experience. So used to being on her own, so used to figuring out how to be perfect without anyone's help, it hadn't occurred to her to ask someone. Maybe she should have asked Grams, or, even Chaz. No, not Chaz.

Squaring herself, she looked again. Her arms and shoulders were bare except for the skinny straps of the camisole. Thanks to the daily workouts that had occupied every morning of her old life, there was a good bit of definition. She could see only a tiny bit of cleavage just above the lacy edge of material and nodded in approval, deciding it probably wasn't too much. Tugging at the skirt, which might be a tad short, she blew out a breath. Oh, well, she didn't have much else to choose from right now so this was it. Her fingers touched the small bandage at her hairline. She tugged a few strands of hair down to hide it. There. Not too bad.

She heard a sharp knock on the front door, and then heard Chaz's voice call Maddie. "Here goes," she whispered to herself as she grabbed her bag and headed downstairs.

Maddie had just handed Chaz one of her two peach cobblers to carry to the car when Lisa appeared on the steps.

"Well, don't you look nice," Maddie said, her eyes gleaming at her

granddaughter. "Doesn't she, Chaz?"

He cleared his throat. "Nice? Um, yeah, nice." He eyed her as she came down the stairs. His thoughts he kept to himself. Nice? Gorgeous is more like it. Stunning. But nice?

"Nice?" a pretty young blonde, standing beside Chaz commented. "Why, you look beautiful!"

The girl approached Lisa. "Hey, I'm Cindy, Chaz's sister. I'm so happy to finally meet you. I've heard so much about you."

"You have?"

"Oh, sure, the whole town is talking about you, but don't you let that worry you. It's just natural curiosity. You're the hottest news in town. Until the next new thing," she laughed.

Lisa smiled, deciding she liked the little chatterbox. Looking up at Chaz she realized he hadn't taken his eyes from her. She smoothed her hair, noticing at the same time, Cindy's modest, floral sun dress. She grimaced. "I think maybe I'm dressed inappropriately. I wasn't sure what to wear. Maybe I should find something to change into."

Chaz found his voice. "No. Don't change a thing. You are definitely gonna be the hit of the night."

They piled into a black Ford Explorer. Lisa in the back next to Cindy who held one peach cobbler on her knees and Maddie in front holding the other cobbler. Chaz behind the wheel.

They drove the few miles to the church while Cindy chatted steadily. By the time they arrived, Lisa knew Cindy was twenty years old, studying to be a nurse even though she was encouraged to go on to get her doctorate by her mother who was a cardiologist. Cindy also let it slip that since Chaz had dropped out of medical school their mom had to find someone to follow in her footsteps, but it would have to be her younger sister who was still in high school or her next older brother who she didn't think would go to medical school, since he was a deputy sheriff for Pine county. All she knows is, it certainly wasn't gonna be her. She could never stay in school that long. She could never do anything for that long, except maybe talk. Her father said she never shuts up.

When Cindy mentioned Chaz had dropped out of medical school, Lisa looked up at Chaz in the rearview mirror, but a clenched jaw and narrowed eyes warned her off asking about it. That's when it dawned on Lisa that there was much more to this man than just a cowboy who'd been in the military.

At the church Chaz tried to carry Maddie's cobbler into the kitchen for her but she was having none of it. "Lisa will help me," she said. "I want to introduce her to some of the ladies and then I promise to bring her back to you."

Chaz had no choice other than to agree. Lisa grinned at him as she followed Maddie into the church, but the moment she walked in, she began to feel self-conscious. Out of the corner of her eye she could see people pointing and whispering. Thank goodness they were early and there wasn't a great deal of people around yet.

In the kitchen, Lisa set the cobbler she'd carried onto the counter. Before she could even look up, the women gathered around.

"Oh, this must be Lisa," one woman exclaimed. And so the introductions began. She was surrounded by women ranging in age from eighty-something down to twenty-something. They hugged her, stroked her hair, kind things were uttered.

"I'm so happy you've come home!"

"You're more beautiful than I ever pictured!"

"Maddie deserves to finally have some happiness."

"I hope you're planning to stay a good long while."

Lisa smiled and nodded so much her cheeks began to ache, but really, she didn't mind. Her heart was so full. How could all these people who had never laid eyes on her be so interested, be so kind, care so much? Is this really how the rest of the world treats each other? She thought of the kindness shown her at the truck stop. Dolly and Bill and Hank were like angels to her. She'd called them to let them know the latest and they'd sounded as if they really cared. What's more, they made her promise to keep in touch. Would they do that if they didn't have a real interest?

Cindy came bursting into the kitchen, greeted all the ladies and grabbed Lisa by the arm. "Sorry, but I've got to steal our celebrity." She dragged Lisa out of the kitchen and into the large gym that had been converted via streamers and balloons, into a dance hall. The lights were dimmer than when she'd come through a few minutes earlier. A band was tuning up and the crowd had grown considerably.

Cindy leaned close to Lisa's ear. "You can thank me later."

Lisa laughed. "You, are a gem. I'll have to think of something really nice to do for you."

Cindy pulled Lisa back toward the group of friends who'd gathered around Chaz, thinking she'd have to let her brother know that

he owed her too.

Chaz's eyes lit up at the sight of Lisa as she approached, wearing those boots and that tight skirt. She was laughing and glowing. Her hair fell forward across one shoulder. Glad and maybe proud that she'd come with him, he took her hand the moment she arrived back at his side. "Lisa, do you remember these guys? You were pretty out of it the first time you met."

Lisa looked them over. She pointed to the tall, slim one with brown hair and eyes. "You're Josh, right? Aaand– you're Troy," she said pointing to a heavyset man with dimples and long hair. They smiled and nodded. "And that means you must be Evan."

Evan frowned. "I'm always last."

Lisa batted her eyes at him. "I was saving the best for last."

Chaz watched as Lisa easily wrapped his friends around her little finger, getting a glimpse of the corporate vice president. She couldn't have reached that position without having mastered some major people skills.

"So, what do you think about our little town?" Evan asked.

Lisa's smile was warm and sweet and Chaz found his pulse quickening as he watched her.

"Well, except for the vicious livestock I find it wonderful. Everyone is so kind."

"Hah!" Cindy exclaimed. "Not everyone."

"Well anyway, everyone I've met so far," Lisa said.

"No livestock in LA, huh?" Josh asked.

Lisa grinned. "Not the kind you cook."

Everyone chuckled at her making sport of the people in Los Angeles. "Speakin' of livestock," Troy jumped in. "Have you ever been horseback ridin'?"

"No, never."

"Unless you count the time Chaz picked you up off the street," Josh put in.

"I'm pretty sure she doesn't remember that," Chaz said. "Because she was out cold."

Lisa blushed.

"So, why don't you let me take you riding?" Troy offered.

"Really?"

"Sure." He smiled broadly as he caught Chaz's frown. "I'd love to show you how to ride."

At the snickers that followed the comment, Chaz's frown turned into a scowl. His frustration mounted as Lisa accepted the invitation. So much for his theory that his friends would encourage him to have a relationship with her. Then again, he thought, this is Troy the pervert, and in Troy's mind, anyone's game. Smiling a wicked smile, he added Troy to his list of people whose butt he needed to kick.

His main need right now though, is to touch Lisa. Amazed at how his fingers itched to connect with her, he was just about to ask her to dance, when Andrea rushed up, grabbing him by the arm.

"There you are, Chaz! I desperately need to talk to you." She tugged on his arm.

"Not now, Andrea."

Lisa watched the scene, intrigued by the pretty, young girl with long, dark hair.

"It's important. Really." She pulled his arm as she glanced at the group of people. Raising her chin, she directed a sneer at Lisa. "I'm sure your little friends won't mind, will you? This is terribly important and I've waited all week to be able to speak to you."

Evan glared at the girl. "I think I'll go find some cleaner air." He left their circle.

Giving Chaz's arm a hard jerk, she became a force to be reckoned with. "I promise I'll bring you right back." Her voice began to tremble. "Please, Chaz. I simply must speak with you."

"Give it a rest, Andrea," Cindy said.

"Bite me," Andrea answered.

Lisa's eyebrows shot up. She recognized the determination in the girl's eyes and knew they would have no peace until he took the time to speak with her. "Go, Chaz. I'll be okay until you get back."

"See there," Andrea said. She tugged one more time before Chaz sighed heavily and left with her.

Troy nodded with a smile. "Good. Now that he's out of the way, dance with me," Troy urged.

Josh laughed. "With friends like you Troy, buddy, who needs enemies." He touched Lisa's arm. "But when you finish with him, I get the next one."

Lisa laughed. "You got it."

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Chaz escorted Andrea out of the building and around to the side near the fenced-in playground. "What are you up to, Andrea?"

"Cha-az," she whined. "Why do you have to be so mean?"

He shook his head. "You haven't seen mean. Yet. Now what is it that's so important?"

Letting go of his arm she swung around, pouting, and leaned against the chain-link fence. "Did you bring that girl to the dance?"

Pure frustration had him running his hand through his hair. "Who I bring to the dance or anywhere else is none of your concern."

"Of course it is. What are people gonna think when you bring someone else to the dance when we're together?"

"We're not together, Andrea. We've never been together."

"How can you say that? After everything."

"What everything? You pestered me until I finally agreed to take you out. The first time I didn't know any better. The second time because I guess I'm a glutton for punishment. That's it, Andrea. We went out twice."

"And we had sex."

He shook his head. "What is wrong with you? I never laid a hand on you."

She pouted again. "Maybe not, but I'll tell everyone you did if you break up with me."

"Andrea, let me see if I can make this clear. There is no you and me. I can't break up with you because we're not together. And I don't care what you tell anyone. However, you might want to consider your own reputation before you go spewing lies." The look on her face made him feel guilty and he softened his demeanor. "Look, Andrea. You're young..."

"I'm twenty."

"I was gonna say, you're younger than me by eight years. You're the same age as my little sister. We just don't have a lot in common. You need to set your sights on someone else."

"I can't Chaz. I want you."

"Yeah, I've figured that out, but you can't have me, so you need to get used to the idea."

"Chaz, you don't understand." She took his hand. When he tried to pull it away she held on. "Wait. Just listen. There's something I need to tell you."

"What?"

"Chaz, I've known ever since I was just twelve years old that you were the one for me."

"Andrea..."

"Just let me finish. Do you remember Cindy's slumber party for her thirteenth birthday? You were getting ready to go into the Marines and you were in your uniform. You were so handsome."

"Give me a break."

"Just listen. I was only twelve then but from that day forward I *knew* you were the one. I just knew. And it hurt me, knowing that Cari was the one you'd be kissing goodbye."

"Stop."

"Two years later when you married Cari, I thought I'd just die. I even thought about taking some pills, you know, just making it all go away, but instead, I stayed strong. Even when your little girl was born, I still didn't give up."

A darkness crept over Chaz. "Let me warn you, Andrea, you need to stop right now."

"No. I can't stop, Chaz. This may be hard for you to hear, but you have to know that I never gave up the idea that you and I were supposed to be together. And then, three years ago, when I was a senior in high school..."

Chaz's jaw clenched.

"...and I heard about the accident..."

His respiration doubled.

"...and I knew, I just knew, ya know? I knew that it happened for a reason, that it was meant to..."

She gasped as Chaz moved close and slapped his hand over her mouth. "Stop it. Just stop." He didn't yell. He spoke with a dead calm, softly, and very seriously. "Ya know what? You are a sick little girl. Don't you ever, not ever, speak of my wife and little girl again. Don't you ever speak to me again. I want nothing to do with you." He released his hold and stepped back.

She stood gasping, her eyes large and filled with tears. "But, Chaz, I'm just trying to make you understand."

"I understand enough. That you could think two people's deaths were for your benefit tells me you need help. Get some counseling, girl. You'll get nothing from me. Stay away from me. Do not speak to me, do not come near me or my family. Next time I may not be able to control myself." He stormed away.

Chaz looked up to see his younger brother, Tyson, making his way up the walk to the church.

"Hey, brother," Tyson called cheerfully.

Chaz stopped, nodded. "Deputy."

Tyson knew immediately all was not well with his brother. "What's happened?"

"That little..." He stopped himself.

Tyson looked past Chaz to see Andrea run inside. "Andrea? What's she done now?"

Chaz turned, started to just walk away, but stopped and came back. He needed to vent. "She said Cari and Julie..." He drew a breath, trying to calm himself and get control of his emotions. "She just told me that the accident was meant to be, to clear the way for her and me to be together."

"Good Lord." Tyson looked away to think of what to say. "Chaz, the girl is unbalanced. You can't let her get to you."

He nodded. "I know. I know. It's just— it's just, well, if it was meant to be then God is as sick as her."

"Uh, Chaz, we're standing right here in front of a church. You need to get a grip. It wasn't *meant to be.* Not for that reason anyway. Accidents happen all the time. To good people. Look, I know you're hurting, but you can't let that girl get to you. That's what she wants."

Chaz nodded and breathed deeply. "You're right. You're right. Okay, I'm calming down now."

"Good. Now, where's Lisa?"

"She's inside being pawed at by every man in the county."

"I heard she's like some movie star."

Chaz smiled. "She looks good, that's for sure. But, she's more than just a pretty face."

Tyson watched his brother's face. That's the most he's said about a woman in three years. It gave him hope that his older brother may once again find happiness. "Well, I can't wait to meet her. Mom says the same thing. She and Dad will be along soon."

Chaz nodded. "Come on, then, let's see if we can burrow through the crowd and get to her."

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"We're neighbors?" Lisa asked with a smile as her dance partner moved her about the floor.

"My land meets up to yours on the south side. You can't see the house from Maddie's place. Maybe I'll come by and take you for a little tour."

"That would be nice," she said.

"Yeah, maybe I'll do that real soon. I don't get by to see Maddie as often as I'd like. She's a wonderful little lady." Marcus smiled his most dashing smile.

"Isn't she though? I barely know her and yet I love her so much."

"I understand. Everyone feels the same way about Miss Maddie. So you've been in Los Angeles, I hear."

"Yes, most recently."

"Where did you go to school?"

"Got my bachelor's in business at UCLA."

"Great school."

"I didn't notice. I was too busy studying and working to pay attention to anything else."

"You know what they say about all work and no play?"

She laughed. "I've heard. It's a good thing my name's not Jack."

"And there's no way anyone could call you a dull boy. I think you may be the most beautiful girl I've ever met and here you are living right next door to me." He raised his eyes to the ceiling. "Thank you, God."

Lisa chuckled. Marcus Winstead is a very likable man, she thought. Not quite the stud that Chaz is, but extremely intelligent and sophisticated. She could see him stopping by in the evenings and chatting with her and Maddie. He would be very entertaining.

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By the time Chaz re-entered the building the music and dancing were well under way. When he finally spotted Lisa on the dance floor, he shook his head. "This evening just keeps getting worse and worse," he mumbled.

"That have anything to do with that little tease," Evan asked as he joined him.

Chaz eyed his friend. "Did Andrea do a number on you too?"

Evan nodded. "I asked her out. She said yes. Then she let me know that she was only trying to make you jealous. So, I went ahead and let her know just where she stood with you and with me, which really pissed her off, so I took her home. Then, apparently, she told her brother I tried to take advantage of her because a few hours later, Marcus was knocking on my door, threatening to blow my head off if I ever touch his little sister again. I promised him he would never have to worry about that."

Chaz shook his head. "I'm amazed that one little girl can cause so much trouble."

Evan nodded toward Lisa. "And now Marcus has your girl out on the dance floor."

Chaz shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "She's not my girl."

Evan grinned. "I have confidence in you."

The music ended. Chaz watched as Marcus obviously tried to get Lisa to accompany him to the refreshment tables. He was relieved to see Lisa gesture his way and break away from Marcus. Finally, he was gonna be able to dance with her, to touch her again, to put his arms around her. Why did it seem to be so vital that he do that?

Chaz's eyes never left hers as she started his way, when another man approached her, usurping her attention. The entire room quieted, making Chaz actually take notice of the man who had approached. It was Joe. Chaz thought about hurrying forward to help with the introductions, but obviously none were needed. They each knew who the other was. The entire crowd knew. He saw Lisa's mouth curve into a smile. Saw Joe nod and reach up to touch Lisa's hair, then brush her cheek softly. Then Lisa fell forward and was crushed in a huge bear hug. The place exploded in applause.

Chaz did move forward then. When he got to Lisa's side she slipped her hand in his. Complete and utter relief rushed through him and he squeezed her hand.

"I can't believe how beautiful you are," Joe was saying.

"She's got the look of you, Joe," Chaz added as the music started up. "Come on, let's go somewhere you can talk."

They found a room just off the kitchen.

Joe smiled as he looked into the green eyes of his firstborn child. "Chaz says you're planning on staying a while."

"Yes, I am."

"What were you doing before you came here?"

Lisa's eyes met Chaz's. "Well, actually, I was vice president of *Golden Hotels*."

Joe's eyebrows shot up. "Impressive. You say you *were* vice president? But no longer?"

"No longer. I quit. It seemed my whole life was a lie and I had to do something drastic." She shrugged. "I guess giving up a three hundred thousand dollar a year job plus bonus is drastic."

Joe smiled at her with the pride of a father. "Well, money isn't the

most important thing in life. You have to love what you do but you also have to have integrity. If you were living a lie, then it sounds like you did the right thing. I know I don't have the right to say this, but, I'm proud of you."

Lisa's eyes filled with tears. "You have every right to say anything to me. You're my father."

When Joe teared up, Chaz decided to vacate the premises. "I'll, uh, I'll leave you two for a while to do some catching up."

"No, no, don't leave, Chaz," Joe said. "We'd be in here all night if we did that. Tonight let's have fun. Let's dance and let Lisa meet everyone else and have fun and Lisa and I will find time this week to get together and get to know each other." He turned toward Lisa. "Does that sound okay with you?"

She smiled the most beautiful smile Chaz had ever seen.

"That sounds wonderful," she uttered softly.

"Chaz," Joe said, as they started for the door. "Does Lisa know about the rest of her family?"

"The rest of my family?" Lisa asked.

"No, she doesn't know," Chaz said, smiling at her. "I haven't had time to cover that with her."

"The rest of the family?" Lisa asked again.

Joe cleared his throat. "Let me begin by saying that when your mother left me I was devastated. I spent years trying to find you," he stopped, looked into her eyes. "I finally had to try to have some kind of life for myself."

"Of course you did," she said, gently touching his arm.

He looked down at her fingers on his arm and covered them with his hand. "You're a sweet girl, Lisa, but what I'm trying to say is, well, I finally did get married. To a wonderful girl named Shirley and then we had a daughter."

Lisa drew in a breath, her eyes wide. "You're saying I have a sister? Oh, my goodness, this is wonderful!"

Joe laughed out loud. "I was hoping you would react like that. Yes, you have a sister. Her name is Megan. She's eighteen. She just came home from her first year at Georgia."

Lisa looked from Joe to Chaz and back to Joe. "I have a baby sister! Is she here? When do I get to meet her?"

"Actually, Shirley and Megan should be here by now. They let me come over alone to meet you, saying they would come a little later.

Megan was very excited and very nervous about meeting you."

Lisa frowned. "Nervous? I hope she doesn't see me as someone trying to steal her dad away."

"Naw, it's not like that at all. Shirley and Megan have been right there, standing by me all these years while I've tried to find you. As a matter of fact, I remember one Father's Day when Megan was little, I guess about eight or so, she gave me a card saying she wished she could give me 'my other little girl' as a gift."

Lisa shook her head slowly. "That is so sweet and amazingly insightful for one so young."

"She's a very smart young lady."

Lisa cast her eyes down briefly before she answered. "I can't wait to meet her." Taking a deep breath, she linked her arm in Joe's as Chaz brought up the rear.

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Lisa stood near the wall yawning, while teenage boys climbed ladders and pulled streamers down from the ceiling. The dance had been over almost an hour now but Maddie and Chaz were on the cleanup committee. It had given Lisa time to speak more to her father and sister and stepmother. They were wonderful and she marveled at being able to know that she was not alone in the world anymore. Not only had she found her grandmother, but she'd found an entire family. She had a father, a step-mother who was the antithesis of what that word usually conjures, and a baby sister who'd looked at her like she was a rock star.

They, all of them, were like something out of a storybook. Kind and goodhearted, warm and loving. Chaz had told her Joe was a good man and he'd been right on. Shirley was so sweet and made Lisa feel completely comfortable. Megan acted as if they'd been best friends who'd merely been away from each other for a while.

Lisa marveled at the fact that she and Megan looked so much alike. Even though Megan was about an inch taller than Lisa and her hair was straight and cut to just below her shoulders, it was still deep red, just like Lisa's. They'd talked and talked, trying to catch up on a lifetime in just a few minutes. Finally they'd pulled themselves away, but Lisa couldn't wait to see them again.

Lisa looked around, to see if there was anything she could do to help with taking down the decorations. She'd tried to go in and help clean up the kitchen but had been shooed out. She moseyed over to

where an industrial sized dust mop leaned against the wall. Taking it between her hands, she leaned on it and smiled, thinking about how kind everyone had been to her.

What was really so surprising was how accepting everyone had been. It's like, Lisa marveled, like she was just a member of the community who'd maybe been away for a while and now she was back. That simple.

She'd met Chaz's parents and immediately had a better picture of the man who'd been playing on her mind like some tune you can't get rid of. What a great family. His mother was very soft spoken and her eyes sparkled when she looked at her husband. Chaz's father was a large, tough looking man, but when he spoke she could tell he was just a big teddy bear.

Chaz's younger brother, Tyson was a cutie pie, Lisa thought. He looked about the same size as Chaz but his hair was darker. A Deputy Sheriff, he'd been on duty and Lisa noticed the effect of the uniform wasn't lost on the ladies attending the dance.

Near the end of the event, Lisa had bid goodbye to a string of men most of whom had offered her an outing of some sort. She'd accepted several invitations. Sighing, she realized she'd better learn real quick to say 'no' or she'd be going out every day and every night.

Smiling at the antics of the boys who had begun to throw wads of streamers at each other, Lisa turned her head to see Chaz making his way toward her, a smoldering look in his dark eyes. Without a word he took the mop from her, leaned it back against the wall, took her by the hand and pulled her down a corridor.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I haven't been able to talk to you, or dance with you, or barely get to speak with you all night," he said, as he came to a halt about halfway down the hallway. He opened a door with a golden '5' on it and tugged her into the room.

Glancing around she realized they were in a small classroom. Noting the Bible pictures on a small bulletin board, she realized it must be a children's Sunday school classroom. Chaz closed the door to the classroom and Lisa looked up at him expectantly.

"I've waited patiently all week to get you to this dance and I waited all night to get a dance with you."

Lisa smiled. "Feeling left out?"

"Yes, I guess, but I was polite, wasn't I? I didn't complain, not one

bit, did I?"

"No, you were a very good boy."

Abruptly, he pulled her close against his body. "I am nothing like a good boy," he said huskily and lowered his head to kiss her.

She'd expected him to hum a tune and have a private dance with her, but this was even better. She raised her mouth for the kiss. She thought briefly about being coy and telling him she'd not given him permission to take advantage of her. Just because he'd kissed her twice now, doesn't mean she'd let him kiss her again, but who was she fooling?

Was it only this morning that he'd set her on the table in Gram's kitchen and kissed her? He'd been so gentle, so sweet, and yet so manly, and she hadn't been able to get it out of her mind. He'd stirred something in her. If Maddie hadn't come back when she did, who knew what his kiss may have led to.

Chaz was definitely very masculine and his maleness got to her. No man had ever had that kind of effect on her. With Glen, being physical with him had almost been a chore. With Chaz, a man she'd known less than a week, she already craved being close to him. All evening she'd been hoping that somehow he would find a way to be alone with her tonight.

She was glad he didn't disappoint her. Somehow she knew he wouldn't, being the man he was. She gave herself up to the moment. His slow, tender kiss was wreaking havoc with her system, causing a burning in the pit of her stomach. Her heart beat so fast she thought it would explode out of her chest and her entire body yearned to be closer to him, if that were possible. When he pulled away for a moment, she almost winced with the pain of it.

He raised his head, looked into her eyes. She swayed, moaned. "Yeah, Red, me too," he said softly, and moved in for another kiss. "I can't seem to get enough," he whispered, his voice rough. "What in the world am I gonna do?"

Lisa looked up at him. "I don't know what to say. No man has ever made me feel like this. I mean, Glen always told me I was hot, he was always trying to get me to have sex with him like in weird places, like on my desk, in a bathroom at the theater, kinky stuff like that. But I got the feeling anyone would have done in a pinch. But you, you make me feel like..." She stopped, shook her head.

"How do you feel, Lisa?"

"The other day, when you first kissed me, you said it was to show me that I'm still desirable. But you make me feel more than just desired, because any guy on the street can make me feel desired. I mean, it feels like you actually care about *me*. That you don't desire just anyone, you desire *me*. Glen gave me up readily enough for a woman in her forties. You make me feel special, and that makes me feel like I want to give you everything."

His heart pounded in his chest. He had her permission, still, he knew he shouldn't do it. He'd only known her a few days, yet she already felt like his property. He should stop. He should take her back to Maddie and come calling later, when he was able to get a grip on himself, but even as the thoughts of restraint raced through his mind his mouth took hers in a fierce kiss. The blood pounded in his ears keeping him from thinking logically. Indeed, he was thinking extremely illogically, because the things he was thinking should not be thought here, not in this Sunday School classroom, not at all outside the bonds of matrimony. What pried them apart was the sound of voices in the corridor outside the classroom.

"I don't see them now, Miss Maddie, but I was just so sure they'd come down this way."

Chaz and Lisa froze, gazing at each other breathlessly. Chaz held a finger to his lips, grateful that the doors had no windows in them. She smiled provocatively at him as his rough fingers tried to smooth her hair.

"Wait until they leave and we'll sneak out," he whispered.

She giggled. "I feel like I'm sixteen again."

He grinned back at her. "If you did this with a sixteen-year-old boy I'm sure you made his year for him."

She shook her head. "No boys ever walked away from me and considered themselves lucky, although there were a few who swore they'd been."

He chuckled, put his arm around her and kissed the tip of her nose. "I truly don't understand the power you seem to have over me," he whispered. "I promise you, I do not go around kissing every beautiful woman that comes my way. But you, Red..." He stopped and shook his head. "You are something else. You, Lisa, are a very special girl." He sighed. "I guess I should apologize for even thinking about compromising you."

She smiled. "Don't you dare."

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1 Thessalonians 4:3

"For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality;"

Chapter 7

Lisa came downstairs in a short, black, evening dress.

Maddie smiled at her. "I know you're probably getting tired of me telling you this, but, my, don't you look pretty!"

"I never get tired of anything you have to say, Grams."

"Oh, what a sweet girl you are. So, tell me, who is it tonight?"

"Marcus Winstead."

"Oh, yes, Marcus. My goodness I haven't seen him in quite some time, oh, except for when he brought that apple crumb pie over several weeks ago."

"He brought you a pie? That is so nice of him."

Maddie nodded with a smile. "He said he's learning how to cook. His mother passed away, oh, I guess it's been eight years now. So sad, so sad. His little sister was only a child when she lost her mother. Marcus was just out of high school. Their father's been gone since they were little. Ran off with his secretary. It's been real hard on them. I didn't have the heart to tell him that the pie needed some work. Tasted like he used salt instead of sugar. Very bitter. I thought I might try to teach him if he really wanted to learn, but I haven't seen him since. And then you came into my life and I've been so busy. So, anyway, where are you two off to tonight?"

"We're going to dinner and then off to a little opera being sponsored by Middle Georgia College."

"Opera? How very fancy?"

Lisa smiled. "Not so very. Just some local talent but it should be entertaining." Her eyes lit up with her next thought. "Is there something you would like to do, Grams? I mean, is there something you've always wanted to do? Like go to the opera? To the ballet? To a baseball game? What are your dreams?"

Maddie waved away her suggestions. "Oh, Lisa, so what are you thinking, sweetheart? Are you gonna be my magic Genie?"

"I could be," Lisa said, the excitement building in her voice. "I have extensive resources."

"Resources? Are you speaking of money?"

"Yes. Lots of it. I have real estate, investments, a fat bank account. What are your dreams, Grams? Let me get them for you."

Maddie shook her head with a smile. "I really have only one dream and I don't think you could help me with that, mostly because I'm too old now."

"What is it, Grams?"

She sighed. "I wanted to be a cooking queen."

"A cooking queen? What is a cooking queen?"

"You know, dear, like those people on TV. Like Julia Child used to be. And now, why, there's a whole network on TV devoted to cooking. I always wanted to be like one of them."

Lisa put her arms around the small woman. "Oh, Grams, that is a wonderful dream."

Maddie smiled. "I just love to cook, and I would love to teach others to cook. It doesn't have to actually be on TV. Actually, I'd prefer to do it in a smaller group. And of course, I love to cook for people, like my own restaurant kind of thing." She gave a sigh. "I can't tell you how it thrills me to have someone feel pleasure when they eat something I've cooked. Sounds silly, I know."

"It doesn't sound silly a bit, Grams. Everyone wants to have what they create be appreciated. I know I tell you after each meal how delicious it is, but really, Grams, I've been around and I've eaten in many a five-star restaurant, and your cooking, with no exaggeration, is some of the best I've ever had."

Maddie touched her hand to her heart. "Well, thank you dear. It makes me happy to know you feel that way."

Lisa turned at a knock on the door. "That must be Marcus. We'll talk about this later." She gave Maddie a big hug. "I promise you, Grams, I will figure out a way to give you your dream."

Lisa opened the door, but it was Chaz instead of Marcus. "Oh, hi. I didn't expect you."

Chaz frowned. "Didn't expect me? You don't have to expect me. What? Am I supposed to make an appointment now?"

"Don't be silly, dear. You know you're welcome anytime. Come in, come in," Maddie said.

Chaz eyed Lisa as she closed the door. She was gorgeous in the short black dress, with her hair piled on top of her head. A few strands fell here and there. Probably placed strategically, he thought. She wore black hose and spikey black heels and it took him a moment to pull his

eyes away from her long, muscular legs. "Well, now, don't you look nice," he said, trying to sound casual.

"Thanks," Lisa said, wondering why she suddenly felt nervous and awkward.

"Going out– again?"

Her chin rose slightly. "Yes. I have a date."

His lips pressed together. "Would it be too impertinent of me to ask with whom?"

She twisted her hands together nervously, shrugged. "No, of course not. It's no big secret. Marcus and I are going to dinner."

"I see."

"Oh, and to the opera," Maddie put in. "Imagine."

"Yes, just imagine," Chaz said softly.

Lisa's mind moved to her and Chaz in the classroom at the church several days earlier. If they hadn't been interrupted, who knows what would have happened. And now here she is going out with another man. It must make her seem like a real floozy, but she just wanted to get to know people. People in her home town. What was wrong with her having a little fun? She'd been out with Troy, learning to ride a horse. That had been an adventure. She'd spent Sunday with Joe, Shirley and Megan. She'd been shopping with Cindy and Megan. She was simply having some fun. She gazed boldly back at Chaz. "It's not a professional opera. It's sponsored by the college."

"So, I guess me stopping by is bad timing on my part."

Lisa shrugged. "Well, Marcus will be here any minute. Did you need something?"

His face darkened. "Need something? No. I don't *need* anything. I brought you this." His hand came out from behind his back. He held a tiny gray kitten.

"Oh, a kitten! Oh, look, Grams, a tiny kitten! It's so small. Can I hold it?"

He handed her the animal, shoving his hands into his pockets. It was just the reaction he'd been hoping for. He'd wanted to please her. Wanted to make her smile. She was making silly little sounds, cooing and gooing at the kitten. Finally, she looked up.

"You brought it for me? I can have it?"

"Yes, you can have it. The cat that lives in our stable had kittens about six weeks ago. This one was the runt. It seemed to need some extra care, so I brought it for you."

"Is it a boy or girl?"

"It's a girl." He took the cat, turned it over and showed her how to tell the sex.

"Oh, thank you, Chaz," she purred. "Grams, do you mind if I keep the kitten?"

"Of course not, dear. I had a cat not too long ago, but when I went into the hospital I suppose he ran away to fend for himself. I haven't seen him since. This one will do nicely."

"Cool. So, what are you gonna name it?" Chaz asked, pleased by her reaction to his gift.

"Hmm, let me see." Her thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. "Oh, that must be Marcus." She handed the kitten to Grams. "Will you take care of her while I'm gone?"

"Of course dear."

Chaz watched as she smoothed her hair and opened the door and invited Marcus in.

Marcus nodded at Chaz. "Chaz."

"Marcus."

"Let me just grab my purse," Lisa said, running up the stairs.

Chaz watched Marcus watch Lisa's backside as she moved up the steps and felt a real storm growing inside him. Marcus was two years younger than him. In school he'd been a troublemaker to say the least. He was now a dangerous man, violent and volatile, a bad combination, though you'd never know it to look at him. He came across as smooth and sophisticated. Well, he may have Lisa fooled, but Chaz knew him, knew he had a dark side.

Back when they were kids, Marcus had tried to mess with Cindy. She'd begged Chaz not to tell. He'd honored his sister's wishes but had beat the heck out of Marcus. Chaz had refused to apologize and suffered through two months of restriction, but it had been worth it.

Keeping his thoughts to himself, Chaz watched silently as Lisa came back down. A minute later, her and Marcus said their goodbyes and took their leave. As he watched them drive away in Marcus' navy blue BMW, Maddie took his hand.

"She'll be okay."

Chaz glanced down at her, squeezed her plump hand. "You're a smart lady, Miss Maddie."

She smiled. "Yes– yes, dear, I am."

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"Jodi, you're the best," Lisa said to the woman who'd been her assistant at *Golden Hotels* for all of three days. They'd talked so many times on the phone now, they'd become close, even though long-distance, friends.

"I know, right? You should've seen Glen Truett's face when he opened the door of your penthouse and the police made him stand aside while I packed your stuff. He wanted to kill me, I could tell. I tried hard not to look smug."

"Really?"

"No."

Lisa burst out laughing. "Jodi, you are a trip. So, were you able to get my old car with no problem?"

"None whatsoever. But he was pretty mad."

"Wonderful," Lisa said with glee, not feeling a bit ashamed for enjoying someone else's pain. "Okay, so, answer me this. Is Glen the new vice president?"

"Okay, hold on to your socks. Lou did not recommend him to the board and they had a huge fight about it."

"She didn't recommend him? I can't believe it." Lisa began to giggle. "This is just too good. So who did she recommend?"

"Some assistant who came in from the competition. He's giving her all the inside information on *Terrace Hotels and Courtyards*. So, he's in and Glen is out. Well, not all the way out. She's letting him stay in his same position."

Lisa smiled. "Sometimes there is justice. Okay, so, onto the important question. Now that you've had a few days to mull it over, what do you think of my idea?"

"Are you ready for this?" Jodi asked.

"I'm on pins and needles."

"John and I are coming to Georgia!"

"Oh— my— goodness, you are kidding me? I really expected you to give me a polite turn down."

"Well, like I said, we've been talking for a long time, praying for a long time, about doing something big, making a change, you know, not just working for other people, but finding our true calling. We both feel like this opportunity was meant to be and it's where God is leading us. We can't wait to get there and get started."

"Oh, wow, Jodi, this is so awesome! So, when will you give your notice to Lou?"

"Well, actually, I won't have to. When Glen told her I helped you to retrieve your things, she had me fired."

Lisa gasped. "Oh, no, Jodi, I'm so sorry."

"I'm not."

"But how can she do that? I mean, there are laws she has to follow. You could sue the company."

Jodi giggled. "The reason on the pink slip was inability to perform duties required."

Lisa let go of a few colorful words. "That's pure trash."

"It's okay, Lisa, don't get all worked up."

"It's not okay."

"It is. Listen to me. There are times when you simply have to let things go. She's not worth my time and I was gonna quit anyway, right? Why let her ruin my mood when I have so many wonderful plans and things to do? I could probably take her and *Golden Hotels* to court, but I don't want to focus on some battle against a former employer. I want to focus on a new relationship with my new partner. And I want God on my side, and suing someone doesn't feel like a heavenly pursuit."

Lisa blew out a breath. "Interesting. I guess when you put it that way, I shouldn't let it bother me. I mean, if you're not bothered, why should I be?"

"Exactly, Lisa. Anyway, it was pretty ridiculous the day I left. She wanted me like, out, immediately. She had security escort me. They even checked my bag."

Lisa shook her head. "Well now, that doesn't surprise me a bit. Lou likes to get in a final stab if she can."

"I guess that's why she was so mad when I laughed at her. She knew she wasn't hurting me in any way. So, let's change the subject. What did your grandmother say?"

"Okay, well, so much has been going on that I haven't come out and told her about my idea yet. I *have* been hinting though, ya know, easing her into it."

"I am so excited. You and me, partners in our very own business venture," Jodi exclaimed.

Lisa smiled. "This is gonna be a blast."

"Total," Jodi agreed.

"I just want to tell you one more thing. All the conversations we've been having, all your talk about God and His plan for you, it's

got me thinking too. I think I want to know this God."

"Aw, Lisa. You just got me choked up. I will be happy to teach you all about Him."

"Looking forward to it."

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"Hello there, cutie pie," Lisa purred softly at her new pet. The kitten purred right back at her. "And how are you this beautiful Saturday morning?"

The kitten answered by playfully arching her back and then pawing at one of Lisa's red curls.

"Chaz is taking me to buy a new car today, so you'll have to be a good girl and don't get into mischief while I'm gone. And make sure you use the litter box, okay? Are you hungry? Huh? Is my little Dixie girl hungry?" Lisa rose slowly from bed, rubbing her nose against the kitten's.

She hadn't been downstairs in her robe since that first day, when she'd been surprised by Chaz, but rather than make Dixie wait for her food while Lisa dressed, she grabbed her robe and headed down.

Grams was already cooking up a storm.

"What's all this?" Lisa asked, after Grams had offered her the usual morning greeting.

"Some of the ladies and I are taking a few meals over to the Johnson's. Melody had her baby yesterday and with three other children to feed, we thought we'd help out."

Lisa shook her head. "I don't know why I keep being amazed at how everyone takes care of everyone around here."

"That's what it's all about, Lisa. Family and friends, they take care of each other."

Lisa put a small saucer of raw cream down for Dixie and sprinkled in some dry kitten food.

"Well, I'd better go up and get dressed. Chaz and I are leaving around nine. I hope Dixie won't get under foot."

"You don't worry about a thing, Lisa. Have fun buying your car."

When Lisa came back downstairs, Chaz was standing at the kitchen counter gobbling down a blueberry muffin and sharing some with Dixie. She hadn't seen him in several days and the impact of his nearness, as usual, was almost overwhelming.

"Hi," she said softly.

He looked up, feeling light-headed at what he saw. An angel. All

in white, except the bright red crowning glory that was taken up at the sides and left hanging long down her back. She wore a long, white gauzy skirt paired with a low-cut peasant blouse and white sandals.

She bent down to scoop up the kitten. He couldn't keep his eyes off of her. He cleared his throat. "Ready to go?" he asked.

"Ready," she answered with a smile.

Her mouth formed a cute pout. "Now, you behave and don't get underfoot," she said to Dixie as she set her down. She leaned down and kissed Maddie's cheek. "Don't work too hard, Grams."

"Don't you worry about me," she said and shooed them off.

The day couldn't have been nicer, Chaz thought as they drove along the highway. The sun shone brightly, not a cloud in the radiant blue sky, and he finally had Lisa to himself. He hadn't realized when he'd taken her to the church social that he'd essentially be setting her up on a dozen dates. He hadn't really minded, except for her excursion with Marcus. Besides, he'd had a million things to do on the ranch. With his father's back injury, Chaz was having to take on his share of work. Even though Josh had been helping out with the horses in the mornings, Chaz still had fences to run, feed to buy, a water line to repair, add in daily chores and the work he'd promised Miss Maddie he'd take care of, and it was easy to see why he'd been strapped. But today was his. Today he was taking a gorgeous girl out to shop for a car and he was taking pleasure in the fact that it may take a very long time.

"So how was your week?" he asked.

"Wonderful. It's been non-stop. I can't believe how my life has changed in just a few short weeks."

"And so, you're happy?"

"Oh, yes, so very happy. Finding home. Finding my father. Actually, finding an entire family that I never knew I had. I feel like I'm just beginning to know who I am."

"And what have you begun to know?" he asked.

She closed her eyes, leaned her head against the headrest. "I'm not someone who is shallow and hard, who lacks feelings or emotions like the woman who bore me. I'm someone who fell in love with a tiny older lady within just a few minutes. Someone who fought tooth and nail for what's mine. Or what I thought to be mine. Someone who had the guts to make a life-changing decision, to leave my job, my fiancé, all that I knew and was comfortable with and to hook up with two strange men who escorted me all the way to Georgia."

"Hold it. Back up. Two strange men?"

She laughed and told him the story of the truck stop. "Bill dropped me off safe and sound at the exit leading to Pine Forest. I'm sure if he'd known I'd get attacked by killer cows he would've stayed with me to the end."

Chaz shook his head. "Killer cows. They were more afraid of you than you were of them."

"Oh, no, Chaz, they've got you fooled. Believe me, that's not how it went down."

Chaz grinned. "So, do you think they may clandestinely try to off me one day and make their escape?"

"I wouldn't turn my back on them if I were you."

He chuckled.

It was a very male sound that had Lisa looking him over while he drove. He puts Glen to shame, she thought. This man should be on one of those beefcake calendars. That blond hair, not long, but not too short, scraggly, she guessed, in a "I don't have time to worry about hairstyles," kind of way. Yet clean, shiny, combed away from his face. He too, like Glen, had a lock that fell over one eye, only Glen's was placed there strategically and Chaz's fell there errantly.

Her eyes drifted down to his broad chest, followed to his arms where he'd rolled up his shirt sleeves showing his ripped forearms. She'd noticed his hands before. Large and rough, yet they'd handled her little kitten gently enough. And they'd touched her in a way no man ever had. Not intimately. Just touched her face, taken her hand, carried her into the house. She'd been intimate with Glen, yet he'd never touched her in that sure masculine way Chaz had about him. Never in a way to make her tremble.

"A penny for your thoughts."

She smiled, knowing she couldn't very well tell him what she'd been thinking. "I, um, was just thinking about Dixie."

"She seems to be thriving already."

"I already love her so much."

"What made you pick Dixie for a name?"

"I'm embracing my southern roots. Dixie."

"Oh, I see."

"Stop!"

Chaz looked around, startled. "What's wrong?"

"Stop the car. Go back. Did you see that?"

"No, what?"

"That truck back there, in that parking lot back there, it had a 'for sale' sign on it."

"So? Surely you don't..."

"Surely I do. Please, Chaz, go back."

He looked for a place to turn around. "I was thinking we'd go into, you know, like a car dealership?"

"I want to look at that truck."

They turned around and headed back, pulled into a small strip shopping center with several cars and trucks parked up near the street with "for sale" signs on the windshields.

"That one," Lisa said excitedly, pointing to a bright red and white Chevy truck.

Chaz pulled up. "You're kidding?"

"Why would you think that? I like it. Don't you?"

"It's okay. I don't picture you in a truck."

"What do you picture me in?"

He bit his tongue.

"Well?"

"I don't know. In something a little classier than a used 2010 Chevy truck."

She shrugged off his comment. "It's five thousand dollars. Do you know anything about cars?"

He ruffled. "Yeah, I do."

"So you'll know if this is a good deal once we drive it, right?"

"Yeah, I'll know."

"Okay, then." She took out her phone and started punching in the number on the sign.

He sighed. If this is what she wants, it's her business. They'd just wait and talk to the owner. He'd be darned if he was gonna let her get ripped off by some guy taking advantage of a female.

While they waited, they walked around the vehicle, looking it over. The truck was well taken care of. Essentially white with red panels, lots of bright chrome, new tires and rims. Really nice rims he had to admit. Lisa got more and more excited as she pictured herself driving around in her new truck.

She looked down the road, frowned because of bright sun in her face, and pulled sunglasses from her purse.

Chaz couldn't take his eyes from her.

She looked at him. "What?"

"You are an amazing creature."

She blushed, leaned against the hood. He stepped in front of her. "I don't know what's wrong with me. Every little thing you do makes me want to touch you."

She drew in a breath. His words spoken so simply, stirred her. "Everything I do? What did I just do?"

He nodded toward her. "You put on those sunglasses." He braced his arms on either side of her.

She took the sunglasses off. "There, is that better?"

He leaned close. "No. Now I can see those gorgeous green eyes."

She smiled. "You're gonna kiss me again, aren't you?"

"I am."

"And there's nothing I can say to stop you?"

"I wouldn't think so. Do you want to stop me?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so. I'm having the same problem as you. You turn me into a loose woman."

"I can't say that I'm sorry to hear that." He leaned forward and took. She leaned forward and offered.

"Get a room," some kid yelled out a car window.

Chaz chuckled. "Great idea."

A car pulled in next to Chaz's Explorer, windows down, radio blasting and a tall, lanky kid with long dark hair, jumped out, came forward, a smile on his face.

"You the ones who called?"

"Yes," Lisa said. "You're the owner?"

"Yes, ma'am. Name's Jason." He held his hand out to her and she shook it firmly.

"Jason," Chaz offered his hand. "So, tell me, why are you selling your truck?"

Jason shook his head with a frown. "Actually, I really hate to let her go, but the kid's car seat won't work in it. Not supposed to have a kid in the front seat, ya know?"

"You have a baby?" Lisa asked.

"Yep. A boy. Named him Jason, after me. Jessie's parents weren't really happy about that. They figure me and Jess will be done within a year, but they don't know me. I'll do right by my kid."

"Looks like you took pretty good care of your truck."

"I love this truck. Engine's brand new. Did it myself. Runs great.

Just finished re-working the transmission right before Jason was born. New tires, new rims, kept up the maintenance for the time I've had it. Course, I bought it used myself. Can't guarantee what came before me, but it drives well. Wanna take it for a spin?"

"Love to," Lisa said.

An hour or so later, Lisa stood next to her new truck, title in hand. New to her, anyway. Chaz shook Jason's hand and waved goodbye. When he turned, Lisa was grinning from ear to ear. He smiled back at her. "So, you did it."

"I did."

"I can't believe you not only paid his full asking price, but gave him an extra five hundred dollars."

She shrugged. "Well, he'll need a lot more than that to take care of his son." She rubbed her hand over the side of the truck. "It's great, isn't it?"

"Yes, it actually is a great deal, still, you buying a used Chevy truck, it surprises me."

"I told you earlier, I'm embracing my southern roots. To me a Chevy truck fits right in. Or am I stereotyping?"

He gave a short laugh. "Well yeah, you're stereotyping somewhat, but I'll try not to be insulted. I'm not ashamed of being a southerner. I've traveled all over the states and all over the world and I like the south just fine, though, I have to say, not all southerners have pickup trucks."

"Do you?"

"Well, yes. I use it when I'm working the ranch, carrying feed or tools. Hauling wood or bushels of pears. Still, not every southerner lives on a farm or ranch and not every southerner has a pickup, hunts deer, chews tobacco..."

"Okay, okay, I get the picture. Do you?"

"Do I what? Hunt deer and chew tobacco?"

She nodded her head.

"No. Chewin' tobacco disgusts me and I don't have a lot of time to go off hunting."

"But you would if you had time?"

"Let me put it this way. I don't believe in hunting for sport. Killing for sport doesn't settle well with me. Hunting for food is different. We eat what we kill. And if we didn't hunt, the deer population would grow out of control and they'd starve to death." He nodded, smiled,

changed the subject. "So, what's next?"

"Well, I suppose we're done for the day, unless you'd like to do something else."

"It's early yet. So ya wanna have some fun?" he asked.

"Like what?" Lisa asked.

"Let me see, in keeping with your theme, what is another southern, country, type thing we could do on a gorgeous Saturday?" He touched a finger to his lips. "How about a picnic?"

"That sounds wonderful," she said, clapping her hands together. "But we didn't bring anything with us."

"No problem. We'll hit the local Wallyworld and get anything we need."

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Lisa stretched out on the newly purchased quilt and stared up through the branches of the tree they lay under. "Ooh, I overdid it. If I eat one more crumb I think I may pop."

Chaz stretched out beside her, arranging himself so their heads lay side by side, their feet at opposite ends.

"So tell me about you, Chaz," Lisa said sleepily.

"There's not much to tell."

"Of course there is. You're always asking me questions. So now, I want to know about you."

He looked up into the afternoon sky, sighing. "Okay, let's see, I'm the oldest of four."

"I already know that. By the way, it was so nice to meet your mom and dad at the dance. I didn't even get to say goodbye."

"Mom was on call and they ended up having to leave early. We're used to it."

"Your brother Tyson seemed pretty nice."

"He's a good guy."

"That Cindy is quite a character. And the baby, Stephanie, she's seventeen, right?"

"Right. Senior in high school. Very serious. Wants to follow in Mom's footsteps. Thinks she's twenty-one."

Lisa giggled. "Most females are born thinking that," she said with a laugh. "But we still haven't talked about you. You said you were in the military?"

"Went in at twenty. Got out at twenty-four."

"And you were a medic?"

"A corpsman. Marines are corpsmen, Army has medics." His mind flashed back to the battlefields. To the blood. To the death.

She turned over, braced on her forearms so that her face hovered just above his. "Chaz?"

He looked into her eyes. "Yes, I was a medic. I'd planned to go to medical school. Mom wasn't too thrilled that I wanted to drop out of school and sign up to go to Iraq. Of course she worried about me getting hurt or worse, but she also knew I would be confronting death daily. She worried about how I'd handle that, but she understood my need to try to help."

She watched his face. There was pain there. "I'm sorry. I guess you really don't want to talk about it."

"No, I really don't."

"Sorry if I upset you. Let me see if I can make it all better. How about a Spider-Man kiss?"

"What's that?"

"Did you see the movie? The first one?" she asked coyly.

"Yes."

"Then you'll remember this." She leaned down and kissed him.

When she lifted her head he was smiling. "Got it."

She touched his face and used her thumbs to smooth the crease between his brows, then stroked her fingers lightly down his cheeks and across his mouth. He found it to be incredibly moving, just those light, gentle, careful touches. She was smiling. He could tell she was thinking about kissing him again, and he wanted her to with every fiber of his being.

He couldn't believe the feelings this girl could make him feel. No, not a girl. She was all woman. He cherished the need she awakened in him. Hadn't felt it for years. He'd forgotten how good and bad it could feel at the same time. He wanted her, that much was obvious. Was that all it was? If he took her for a tumble would it get her out of his system? Or would he want more? Would she give more? Was he falling in love with her? What else would explain his constantly thinking of her, of his need to be near her, to touch her?

Enough of this. He took her head in his hands and brought her to him, nipping at her full lower lip before he delved in. She sighed softly. Hands still on either side of her face, he pushed her back so he could see her when he said his next words. "I want you, Lisa."

"I know," she whispered, then pulled away, then sat up. "Come

swing me."

He sat up, watching her as she walked to the swings.

They played on the swings, and the monkey bars and the carousel. Several kids joined Lisa on the carousel while Chaz spun them around. Lisa held one small boy in her lap while the mother stood nearby watching with a grateful smile. "Weeeee," she crooned at the little boy. And if Chaz hadn't been in love with her already, he knew now that he was.

As they played, the crowd of children grew. It seemed they gravitated toward Lisa, Chaz thought. She's like the Pied Piper, leading them around, playing tag, laughing. So beautiful as she floated among them, her white skirt billowing around her in the breeze. She knelt down to speak with one little girl. He couldn't hear what the child was saying, but Lisa smiled and touched the little girl's nose and the little girl's face glowed like a ray of sunshine on a flower. And the memories hit him so hard he staggered.

Nausea swept over him. His eyes moistened. He turned away, trying to shake the images that popped up in his brain like a slide show he couldn't stop. Julie laughing, Julie playing in the sandbox, Julie helping her Mommy water flowers, Julie with chocolate birthday cake all over her face. He stumbled, braced himself on a nearby tree. Dear Lord God, would it ever stop? He slid down and sat, his knees drawn up, his arms resting on them.

He didn't notice when Lisa sat down beside him. Had no idea how long she'd been there when she rubbed her hand over his back.

"Chaz? You okay?"

He swallowed hard, trying to find his voice. "I'm fine."

"Is the heat getting to you?"

"Maybe."

She watched his face and knew there was more to it than that, but also knew he wasn't one to talk about what bothered him. She chewed on her lip trying to figure him out.

"You don't like kids?"

He stood abruptly. No way could he have this discussion with her. He drew a deep breath to help him get control. "Of course I like kids." He held his hand out to her. "Come on, it's after five."

"Where are we going?" she asked, hoping he wouldn't say that they were headed home.

He pulled her up close to him. "We're gonna continue

indoctrinating you into your southern heritage."

"Oh really? How are we gonna do that?"

"I've just decided that we're gonna grab some beer and head down to the Wilson's lake."

"The Wilson's?"

"They live down about five miles east of Pine Forest. Old couple. They have a fairly large lake on their property and for the last fifty years or more they've shared it with the good people of Pine Forest, Georgia. They say they like letting us 'youngsters', as they like to put it, camp out, have picnics, play in the water, do some fishing, or just watch the stars. Whaddya say, Red? Ya wanna do some star gazing with me?"

"I think I'd like that just fine."

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1 John 4:18

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.
For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears
has not been perfected in love."

Chapter 8

They arrived at the Wilson's property to find several couples around a bonfire. Chaz drove to the far side of the lake, the dark side, with Lisa following right behind in her new truck. They pulled up side by side and backed in so that the bed of Lisa's truck faced the lake. Chaz spread the thick comforter in the bed of the truck and set a cooler full of beer nearby. It wasn't quite dusk yet and Lisa wandered down to the shoreline, lifting her skirt to keep it from getting wet.

Chaz watched her play in the water. She reached between her legs and pulled the back of her skirt through and up and tucked it into the front waistband, creating shorts. Then she waded out until the water passed her knees. She looked back at him, smiling.

He watched her, fighting how much he wanted her. She had to know what he was thinking. She knew the moment she'd consented to come to the lake with him. The pull was strong. What would his parents think about what he wanted to do? He grimaced. What would his preacher think about it? Though he wanted her something powerful, he was in no hurry. Actually, he was enjoying the anticipation. Three years he'd been celibate. No one had captured his interest– until now. She came back to the truck and pulled her skirt loose again, took the beer he offered and slid up onto the tailgate to sit beside him.

"Water cold?"

"Not too bad," she said, tipping her bottle up to drink. "So, like, do you know any of those people?" she asked, squinting to see across to the other side of the lake.

"Probably. Want to go see?"

"Sure."

Beer in hand, they walked around the lake side. "You have your phone on you?" Chaz asked.

"Um, nope, I left it in my purse back in the truck. Why? Do you need it to make a call?"

"No, you need it."

"For what?"

"You need to call Maddie and tell her not to worry. Tell her you'll

be home late." Reaching into his pocket he pulled out his phone, pulled up Maddie in his contacts, and handed the phone to her.

Lisa's brows knit. "It's weird, you know. I'm not used to having anyone actually care where I am or if I'm okay."

His hand brushed across her shoulders. "Miss Maddie cares, Lisa. And Joe." He looked down at her, pulled her close as they walked. "And me."

She smiled up at him as she hit the call button and then spoke to her grandmother. As they neared the raucous crowd Chaz waved. "Well, in answer to your question, I do know some of these people. Most of 'em."

Even as he spoke, his sister Cindy came running up. "Chaz! Lisa! Hey! What are you doing here?"

"Just spending some time together. What about you, sis?"

She laughed. "Just having some fun."

"With who?"

"Don't go getting all brotherly on me, Chaz."

"I wouldn't. I would let you just go about your business, if I didn't smell alcohol on your breath."

"No way."

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

Lisa tugged on his hand. "Come on, Chaz, if she had a drink I bet she won't the rest of the night, will you Cindy?"

"Absolutely not," she said. "I promise."

"See that you don't. I don't want to have to kill some poor kid because he took advantage of you while you were illegally drunk."

"I promise, Chaz. Not another drop." She gave Lisa a hug. "Thanks, Lisa. You're totally cool in my book."

"You're welcome. Don't make me regret it."

"I promise."

"And this makes us even for saving me the other night."

"Absolutely," Cindy said with a grin. "We are totally even." She turned and hurried off to join her friends.

They watched her run off. There were several other young couples partying. Some played in the water. Some lay on blankets, drinking beer, some tossed a frisbee and some roasted marshmallows at the fire.

Chaz turned to her. "Want to roast a marshmallow?"

She smiled, shrugging her shoulders. "Soo, believe it or not, I've never roasted a marshmallow."

"You're kidding?"

When she only frowned he ushered her over toward the fire where they were immediately offered sticks and marshmallows. Chaz watched Lisa as she tried to roast her marshmallow, carefully turning the stick so it would brown evenly on all sides. At one point, however, she accidentally got it too close to the heat and the whole marshmallow caught fire.

"Ooo, ooh," she cried, jumping back quickly, her cheeks puffing out as she blew out the flame. She looked over at Chaz with an adorable pout on her face.

"It's okay. You can eat it anyway. It still tastes good."

She pulled the sticky blob from her stick and tried to stuff the whole thing into her mouth, laughing when half of it dropped down onto her chest. Using her finger she scooped it up and sucked. Chaz swallowed hard.

He took her down to the water to help her wash her hands and let her dry them on his shirt.

"Come on, let's go back to our side. It's quieter."

He held her hand as they walked. His mind had strayed to the future and he couldn't help but wonder what his and Lisa's future would be.

"So, what are you gonna do?" he asked.

"About what?"

"I mean, are you gonna get a job? Or go to school? Learn a foreign language?"

She laughed. "Well, I haven't spoken to Grams about this yet, but I have some really big plans." She looked up at him slyly. "And some of the plans include you."

She had his interest. "Really? Like what?"

"Okay, just listen. Don't say anything until I'm finished."

"Cross my heart," Chaz promised, loving how her eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Grams wants to cook. She wants to cook for a lot of people, and she wants to teach others how to cook. So, I have this big plan to turn the farmhouse into a fabulous, high-end little inn." At his shocked look she held her hand up and went on quickly. "Cooking lessons will be part of the package. That will make Grams happy and she'll run the inn's kitchen, and create the menus, etcetera. I'll do some major refurbishing of the place, we'll employ a few good people and we'll be

off and running."

"And, where do I come in?"

"Well, with the right advertising I'll be able to get people to come to a nice, soothing, old-fashioned farmhouse for rest and relaxation, for a slice of hometown Americana and to learn some cooking skills, but I need a bigger hook. Something for the men. So, I thought, what about your ranch? What about letting people take an active part in running a ranch? People who spend all their time working in the city could have quite an adventure..."

"Running a ranch? You mean like a dude ranch?"

"Well, yes and no. Not really a dude ranch, because you wouldn't be involved in finding activities for the tourists, only providing opportunities for those who wish to see how you work. Maybe even help. There will only be a few people. Your ranch will run like it always does, only you will allow people to ride with you and watch how it's done. They'll be able to see what it's like to run a ranch full of killer cows. That will seem like heaven to city people who run in the rat race every day."

He smiled. "So, when were you gonna approach me about this if I hadn't asked?"

"I was gonna wait until I had a proposal drawn up, give you some decent demographics and statistics to look at, give you a better overall view of the plan."

He was smiling like the Cheshire cat.

"What?"

"I'm realizing I've just met the vice president of *Golden Hotels*."

She blushed. "I really have put a lot of thought into it. It will bring revenue to the town. Joe could expand. Some of the townfolk could open country type markets, produce stands, craft and hobby venues. From spring to fall, the town would really benefit. Then in the winter, some may come if only to sit in front of a roaring fire. The town could put on a Christmas pageant, again have venues with Christmas type items. You know, a country Christmas sort of theme. I'm very serious about this. I've run a conglomerate of hotels, I know I can make one little country inn a success."

He squeezed her hand. "I'm terribly impressed and I have no doubt that you can make it work. So tell me, what does Miss Maddie have to say about it?"

"She actually doesn't know yet. I'm gonna speak with her about

it tomorrow."

They arrived back at the truck. Chaz jumped up into the bed of the truck and sat down, leaning his back against the back window. Lisa pulled two more beers from the cooler, handed one to him and joined him. "So, what do you think, about your part in my plans?"

Lips pressed together, he nodded. "It sounds doable. Of course, I'd have to speak with my father about it, and make sure we won't be liable for anything."

"That can all be worked out satisfactorily, I believe."

During the lull in the conversation, she looked up into the sky. One by one, as the sky grew darker, the tiny lights blinked on. She scanned the sky, counting only five stars, then after a few seconds scanned again and counted thirteen. Chaz's arm came around her.

"Are you really counting stars?"

She smiled up at him. "Just seeing how many more there are as the sky gets darker and darker. Does that seem silly?"

"Not at all. I love to look up at the night sky. The universe is so amazing and we know so very little about it, really."

Lisa sighed. "In Los Angeles, you can barely see any stars at all, but when I was driving across the country, there were times at night when I could've turned off my headlights because the moon and stars were so bright."

"When I was in Iraq, I would look up at the sky, and wonder if there were any stars, maybe some way off on the edge of the night sky I was looking at, that maybe could've been seen by this part of the world." He realized he'd been thinking about Cari during those times in Iraq and blew out a breath. Cari was gone, now. He had to move on. He hadn't wanted to for a very long time, but Lisa made him want to live again. To feel again. To love again. "Come here," he said, patting the space between his legs.

He pulled her over to sit between his thighs, her back against his chest, and wrapped his arms around her.

"Ummm, that feels good. Warm."

"Were you cold?"

"Maybe a little chilled." She wriggled her backside against him trying to get closer to the warmth and felt his arms tighten.

"Oh, girl," he whispered into her ear. "Be still."

His mouth moved over her cheek, then lowered to taste her neck.

She closed her eyes and allowed herself to simply experience it.

Finally, she turned her head slightly to the side so she could look up at him. He kissed her deeply, slowly, passionately until he had her moaning and still he didn't relinquish the kiss.

When he finally did take his lips from hers she protested, raising her arms above her head, taking hold of him on either side of his face and pulling him right back down to her.

Lisa felt safely enclosed in a warm, dark, cocoon of sensuality. Wrapped in Chaz's strong arms, held captive by his kiss, experiencing sensations that overwhelmed her. How was this possible? How could he make her feel so much, yet he wasn't even touching her. She was fully clothed yet felt the vulnerability of giving herself over completely to his care. She pulled away from him, stood.

"Where are you going?" he asked, looking up at her.

"Right here." She turned to face him and sat back down.

Chaz watched her face as she sat on his lap, her slim, athletic legs on either side of his hips, her eyes closed, her head tilted back. Reaching up he pulled the clips that held her hair up on the sides. The sea of red shimmered down against her cheeks. Her eyes opened and she smiled sweetly. His heart slammed into his ribs.

He tried to understand what was happening to him. He hadn't felt anything for years. He'd been numb. He thought that was how the rest of his life would be. But this fiery redhead came bursting onto the scene and everything changed. Now, it was all he could do to keep from taking her right here and now. He knew better. He was not thinking the thoughts that a Christian man should be thinking. What would happen if he were to make love to her tonight, right here in the back of a truck? How would she feel about that? When it was over, how would HE feel?

Making love to this amazing woman, it should be more special than a quick go, in the back of a pickup truck. This woman was not just any woman. She was special, and perhaps the only key to his ever being happy again. She is a gift, he realized, a gift from God, and he should be treating her with reverence and not like trash.

Quickly, he pushed her off his lap, turned her around and pulled her up close to his side. She gave a little mewl of disappointment, so he raised her chin with his hand and kissed her, over and over, until she forgot the disappointment.

They sat quietly for several minutes.

"What are you thinking about?" he finally asked.

She smiled. "Actually, I was thinking about Glen."

He turned his head. "Tell me you're kidding."

She giggled. "I'm not kidding, but believe me it's not a slight to you or your manhood in any way, it's just the opposite. I was thinking about how selfish he is. He never made me feel the way you do. I'm realizing it was because he didn't care. How I felt, whether or not I was enjoying our time together, it wasn't important, not to him." She shrugged. "I don't know, maybe I'm being too harsh. Maybe he just didn't know. Maybe he thought I felt the same things he felt."

"Trust me. He didn't think that."

"How do you know?"

"Because a man knows."

She sighed. "Just being here with you, sitting beside you, touching your hand," she said, lifting their joint hands up. She turned her head toward him. "Kissing you, it's like realizing there's a whole new world out there. One I didn't have access to."

He smiled. "I want to take you there."

She snuggled up closer.

"So," Chaz began. "Drinking beer and making out in the bed of a pickup out under the stars on a Saturday night, that's about as country as you can get. Are you still glad you've connected with your southern roots?"

"Absolutely," she purred.

They were quiet until she tugged on his hand. "Lie down flat beside me so I can look at the stars without straining my neck."

He slid down, put his arm out so she could lay her head on it. They watched the stars, trying to name the constellations, until she shivered. He rolled toward her, using his body to warm her.

"Umm, that feels good. I was getting chilled."

"Let me see if I can warm you up."

Their lips met and they sank quickly and deeply into the warm oasis of bliss. The fire started to build, though Chaz had no intention to do anything more than hold her. He gave himself over to it, delighted to be experiencing feelings he thought never to have again. He'd thought this part of his life was over. Then this woman appeared and everything changed. He was in love with her. He truly was, he admitted. The thought was accompanied by a small slice of guilt, but he pushed it out of his mind.

He pulled away, just slightly, to gaze at her. Her eyes looked into

his. Those green, green eyes, no they looked brown tonight. His heart skipped a beat, he shook his head, blinked hard, and they became green once more.

He kissed her again and she gave a soft moan. She did that whenever it was a long, slow kiss. He smiled. That was intimate information. Cari had always said, to have intimate information about someone was like owning their soul. Cari. No. Stop it. Can't think about Cari. Not now. Please not now.

He looked at Lisa's face again, afraid of what he might see, but she was there, smiling. She spoke his name. He looked at her. Could see her silky, brown hair, her big, brown, doe-like eyes. Blood seeped out of her forehead, ran down her face. No. God, please, no. He trembled. His world turned upside down, inside out. Nausea swept over him. He withdrew into himself. Sat up quickly and turned away.

Silence. It enveloped them. It seemed the entire world stood still. Then Lisa's hand gently touched his back.

"Chaz? What's the matter? What's wrong?"

He drew a breath to steady himself, blew it out slowly. "I– I need to get you home."

"But I..." She stopped herself as she recognized the brusqueness of his tone. "Okay." She sat up, adjusted her clothing. What had happened? What had she done? She crossed her arms over her body in a protective gesture, suddenly feeling ashamed and self-conscious.

He glanced back at her before he jumped over the side of the truck and moved to the front. Leaning against the hood he stared out into the woods that surrounded Wilson's Lake. All was quiet now. The kids across the way had moved on, and, figuratively, so had Chaz's heart. It was silent now too. He'd been so happy. Happy to find love again. To find life again, but he'd just been shown that it wasn't meant to be. Not for him. He'd had his one chance at happiness and had it ripped away.

Apparently, he had no right to love again. He was damaged goods. Not fit for anyone, especially not someone like Lisa who was so full of energy and passion. How could he have a relationship with her? From now on, he would be terrified of being intimate with her in any way. Terrified of what he would see. What kind of man is that? Not a man at all.

There was no getting past it, was there? Heaven knows he's tried. Post-traumatic stress, they say. Counseling hadn't done anything to

help. The dreams, the flashbacks, the physical symptoms, they were tearing him apart. It's a wonder he could function at all. No way could he tell Lisa he'd just kissed his wife vicariously through her. And he hadn't meant to. Cari was dead. He knew that. Understood that. Accepted that. Life goes on. That's what everyone keeps saying. And recently, for a brief time he'd begun to believe that it could. He was in love with Lisa Lewis. He cared for her. Liked her. Needed her. Wanted her. But it doesn't seem to matter what he wants. He was a broken man. All the king's horses and all the king's men...he sighed.

If he told Lisa about the accident, she would be sweet, compassionate and understanding. And she would say it's okay. She'd tell him they'd work through it. And then ten years down the road when she's been beaten down, unfulfilled, yearning for something he couldn't give, she'd finally give up on him. It would be a tidy split. No ugliness. Lisa would want to avoid that. Nevertheless, she'd regret the years she'd thrown away on him, the youth she'd let slip through her fingers.

He looked back at her. She was upset. He'd hurt her. He didn't want to. He loved her. Loved her enough to end the relationship now. She'll think he's a real piece of work and put him in the same category with Glen. She'll think he toyed with her, led her on. His heart broke. It had to be done.

"You ready to go home?" he asked, turning abruptly.

Her chin quivered. Her eyes were open wide with pain. He didn't know if she'd fallen in love with him like he had with her, but he did know there were strong feelings on her part. Which is all the more reason to end it now.

He folded the quilt from the back of the truck and placed it in the passenger side, then grabbed the cooler and placed it in his SUV. She slid behind the wheel of her truck and closed the door quietly, staring out toward the dark woods. He leaned in the window. "Follow me out. I'll lead you home."

"Chaz," she said softly, her voice quavering. "Will you talk to me a minute? I just want to know..."

"I'm really tired, Lisa. I'm sure you are too. Just follow me."

Her mouth shut. He turned away to avoid seeing one of the tears that were in her eyes spill over. Coward. Such a coward. He climbed into his vehicle, slammed the door and gunned the engine. Had to force himself to drive slowly so she could keep up.

At the house he pulled into the drive and watched as she parked her new truck. She never looked his way as she made her way inside. The front door closed and a light came on. He sighed, hoping she'd be okay. He knew Miss Maddie would take good care of her. He sped off, gravel flying.

Did he have any other choice? It was obvious to him that the flashbacks would never stop. Never. The accompanying nausea and disorientation were physically devastating. Lisa was young and vibrant. A true sexual being. She needed a man. A real man. Not some ghost of a man who couldn't differentiate between her and a freaking corpse.

He slammed his fist on the steering wheel, pulled up in front of his lonely little house and stared at the dark windows. There was no light on inside his house and none inside his heart. He was a prisoner of his own mind and there was no escaping.

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Psalm 34:17-18

"The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them;
he delivers them from all their troubles.
The Lord is close to the brokenhearted
and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

Chapter 9

Lisa sat carefully on the edge of her bed. Raising a trembling hand, she pushed the hair out of her face. What had happened? What had she done? Did she accidentally blurt out the words she'd been thinking, 'I love you, Charles Anthony Stewart the Third?' She'd been in the throes of passion. Had she spoken without realizing it? And if she had, would those words really have had this effect on Chaz? Well, of course they would. He's a man. And men hate commitment, don't they? The words, "I love you," scare men. So, had she spoken those words and he turned tail and ran?

Or maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe it was just her. She hadn't inspired real love in anyone who'd been in her life. Not her mother. Not Glen. She'd thought a relationship with Chaz would be different. She'd certainly never felt so much, so fast for anyone. She'd considered that the defect had been in Lou and Glen. Not her. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe it *was* her. She stood and went to the mirror.

Everyone she meets tells her she's pretty, even beautiful. She tried to see it. Turning side to side, she tried to see herself objectively. Looking past the skinny, awkward girl she usually saw she tried to see the beauty. Not too bad looking, she thought. So, is that it? She looks good so she must not have a real soul, with real feelings? Use her and discard her, is that what she inspires in people? And she plays right into it, doesn't she? She gave in pretty readily to Chaz. If he'd wanted her, she would have given herself completely. She certainly didn't make him work too hard to get what he wanted. But even before that happened, he'd discarded her pretty darn fast. He'd simply turned away. Guess he decided he didn't want her after all.

The anger bubbled up fast, hot. She spewed a few names. Boy you really played it well. You had me completely snowed. She stomped her foot. More curses. Her gaze caught a mark on the side of her throat and she moved closer to the mirror. Her hand moved to touch the side of her neck where he'd marked her with his beard. Tears welled in her eyes, but only for a moment. Furiously, she ripped off her clothing, major-league pitching it into a corner of the room, grabbed her robe

and headed to the bathroom, intending to wash away every last clue he'd left on her body and her mind.

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Days later, on Wednesday morning, a knock on the back door had Maddie and Lisa raising their heads from the detailed discussion they were having at the breakfast table.

"Come in, Chaz," Maddie called.

Lisa tensed but she wouldn't look away. No. She had some pride. The door opened, he stepped in, taking his Stetson from his head in a polite gesture. He'd worn it the day they'd first met and her heart lurched. He smiled at Maddie, then his eyes met hers. She raised her eyebrows and gave her haughtiest expression. His mouth pressed together in a straight line, his jaw clenched and the look in his eyes could only be classified as hurt. Well, good, she thought.

"Good morning, Chaz," Maddie said cheerfully. "Come in, have breakfast, help us celebrate."

He cleared his throat. "Uh, sorry, Miss Maddie. Can't. Got a lot to do. So, um, what are you celebrating?"

"Well my sweet boy, you are looking at the head chef for the *Pine Forest Country Inn*."

Chaz forced a smile. She was beaming with pride. "Well, now that is a wonderful thing. We'll have to widen the road, maybe even pave it, there'll be so many people come to taste your fixin's."

"Aww, go on, you big flirt."

"*Pine Forest Country Inn*, huh?" He looked at Lisa. "Sounds like quite an undertaking."

She shrugged. "Nothing I can't handle."

He swallowed, turned his gaze back to Maddie. "Maybe later, when I have more time, you can tell me all about it, Miss Maddie. I want to hear all the details. Right now, I just stopped by to let you know your terrace garden is ready for you to plant. If you'd like I can take you to the nursery Friday afternoon, and you can pick out flowers to your heart's delight."

"That won't be necessary," Lisa said in clipped tones. "I have plenty of time to take Grams to the nursery. We're a team now. We won't be needing you."

Chaz's eyes lowered. He nodded his head. "Fine. Well, good morning to you." He opened the door.

Maddie laughed. "Of course we need Chaz. What would we do

without our favorite man around to take care of us?"

Lisa didn't answer, because she was feeling a bit guilty for the rude remark she'd made.

Chaz looked back over his shoulder. "Call me if you need me, Maddie. I got the screens back on the windows. Don't forget to lock them up. I won't be able to start on your new patio for a week or so."

"We'll have to talk about the patio," Lisa said. "There's a lot of remodeling to do and the backyard will be a major part of it."

He nodded again. "Fine. We'll talk." He stepped out and closed the door.

Chaz stood on the back porch, staring out at nothing. He'd needed to see her, needed to see if she was faring well. He'd waited three agonizing days, and what he saw was she was mad. Mad as hell. He was glad that her temper had kicked in. That would get her through. What he hadn't counted on was the pain that had slammed into his own chest when he looked into her eyes. Beebe whinnied at him, bringing him out of his trance. Well, he had work to do. He mounted and rode off.

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Chaz pulled up to his parents' house Friday night. He drew a deep breath and blew it out. This was not gonna be fun. He headed in the front door and made his way back to the kitchen where he knew his mother would be happily cooking up a storm. She looked up the moment he entered the room.

"Hi baby."

He kissed her cheek. "Hey, Mom." Lifting the lid of a large pot he sniffed the contents. "Spaghetti. Smells good."

"Your father's been feeling a little down so I'm making his favorite." She placed bread in the oven, turned, and looked him over.

Here it comes, he thought. Just get it over with.

"So, honey, have you seen Lisa lately?"

He sighed. "I saw her briefly Wednesday morning," he said as casually as he could.

"Did you ask her to come to dinner Sunday?"

He looked down. "It's not gonna happen, Mom."

She was quiet. She'd been hoping. He knew that. Hoping he would finally be able to pull out of it. His sweet mother loved him and he knew it probably hurt her as much as it did him to have those hopes dashed. She'd lost her grandchild and her daughter-in-law, and as she's

said many times over the last three years, she feels like she's losing him too. But what could he do?

"Chaz..." She stopped.

He could see her mind working, trying to figure out the best way to approach him. The best way to tiptoe around his fragile mind.

She smiled up at him. "What happened? Did you quarrel?"

The question was asked hopefully, because a quarrel would be easily brushed aside.

"No. Not really." Running his hands through his hair he blew out a breath in frustration. "Look, Mom, I'm sorry. I tried, but I can't do it. I'm no good to anyone."

"That's not true."

He looked up, but turned away quickly when his eyes moistened. "It is. Accept it." He rushed out.

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Lisa pulled the last of the weeds from the mound of squash and paused to wipe her brow. Maddie had insisted she wear the silly gardening hat to keep the sun off her face but it was hot and cumbersome. Looking around her where she knelt in the dirt she had to smile. No one who knew her in Los Angeles would ever believe she was living the simple life of a farm girl. Here she was, dirty, sweaty, happily plucking weeds from a mound of dirt that would eventually be squash.

Grams had taught her about squash, about beans, about cabbage and corn. Cucumbers and tomatoes, peppers and okra. She was learning quickly. They had discussed the vegetable garden, deciding it could be a big selling point for the inn. Meals made with fresh, organically grown veggies, beef from free-range cattle. People would eat it up, she thought, chuckling at her pun. If, that is, she could still acquire Chaz's participation. If not, she'd replace him with another local rancher.

Jodi and her husband, John, would be arriving by the end of June and they would all sit down together with Maddie to finalize a plan of action. Lisa had already contacted a few contractors to put in bids for the work on the house. They had to add bathrooms, and do a major kitchen makeover. The rest was merely cosmetic.

The town was abuzz with the news since Maddie had told all her friends. Lisa's father, Joe, had been ecstatic and willing to help make her dream a reality in any way possible. She smiled at the thought of

her new family. Shirley, her step-mom, was a pretty woman, slim and tall with soft brown hair and eyes. She was kind and understanding and completely in love with her father. It did Lisa's heart good to know that sometimes relationships do work out.

Maddie had cooked Sunday dinner and invited Joe, Shirley and Megan over. Lisa had been in heaven helping Maddie play hostess. She'd looked around the table at Joe and Shirley, Grams and sweet Megan and realized, these people belonged to her. Only every once in a while did the happiness get clouded over by thoughts of Chaz.

She frowned. Now, here she was thinking of him again. He'd seemed downhearted last week when he'd stepped into Maddie's kitchen. She'd expected him to gloat. To put on a cheerful front at the very least. But it seemed he hurt as much as she did. She regretted sniping at him. She liked to think she wasn't a cruel person. Then again, maybe she was more like her mother than she thought.

As if thinking about Chaz caused him to materialize, a shadow passed over her.

"Miss Maddie, you shouldn't be out here so long."

At the sound of his voice, Lisa stood, turned around.

His face fell. "Oh. I thought you were Maddie."

"Obviously."

He looked away uneasily, rubbing his hands against his thighs.

Immediately contrite, she backtracked. "Must be the hat," she said, in a much softer tone.

He nodded. "Well, I'll get out of your way."

"Wait. I need to talk to you."

He stopped, his heart beating a mile a minute. Should he chance a conversation? Even a short one? Every word with her was painful. Looking at her tore him apart. What if he broke down, told her everything? Sure, she would give him her sympathy. She would probably stick by him, but is that what he wanted? No. He didn't want anyone to be with him out of pity. Dammit, he'd been over it. If he'd thought for one moment he'd not be able to be with Lisa without thinking about Cari he would never have pursued it. What is wrong with him? The truly scary thing is that he couldn't control it. Had he totally lost his mind?

Still, though he didn't really want to chance a conversation with Lisa, he had to do it, because though he was many things, he was not a coward. He was a man who did what he thought he should do no

matter how hard. So he conceded. He swallowed, nodded.

Tossing the hat on the ground, she came outside the high fence that kept the deer from eating the vegetables. She reached up to smooth stray hairs back toward the single braid she wore. She hadn't expected him to agree to talk, so she had to quickly gather her thoughts. She wanted answers. Or at the very least, an apology. So, she would start with one of her own.

"Chaz, I'm, uh, I'm sorry I was so rude to you last week."

He shrugged. "It's okay. I hurt you. You hurt me back."

"And so that brings me to my next question." She paused, realizing instinctively that she needed to tread softly. "Is there a particular reason you were so cold with me Saturday night?"

He blew out a breath. "I didn't mean for things to turn out like they did."

"You didn't mean to kiss me? Share time with me, or whatever you want to call it?"

He swallowed hard. "I meant to do that."

"So, if you didn't mean for things to turn out like they did, then you didn't mean to hurt me?"

He nodded.

"If you didn't mean to hurt me then you didn't have to."

Chaz shook his head. He didn't know what to say. His heart wanted to comfort her, to make it all better, but he needed to make her hate him. He shrugged. "Whatever you say."

Her eyes narrowed. "Thinking about what happened, it would almost seem like you wanted to get close to me, make me want to be with you, and then toss me away."

He nodded, sighed. "What can I say? I'm a man."

She stood silently, watching him. "I don't believe you."

"Believe what you want."

Determined to get to the bottom of things she changed tactics. "You know, I thought it was me. I thought it was something I'd done or said to make you dump me so unceremoniously. I tried to figure out what it is about me that makes people feel like ripping out my heart and tossing it away without blinking an eye. What is it about me, that inspires such intense dislike? I mean, this month, well, you know, it's been a really bad month."

He sighed. He'd wanted her to hate HIM. Not blame herself. He reached to touch her shoulder, but stopped himself when she flinched.

"It's not you, Lisa. It's nothing you did. It's me."

She nodded her head. "Okay. I'll accept that. I'll gladly accept that. But what about you?"

He shook his head. "There are things you don't know about me."

"Then tell me."

"Lisa, let me just say that you're better off without me. I'm no good for you. If you hook up with me it will ruin your life. I won't be able to give you what you want."

She was quiet while she considered his words. "Supposing that's so, and I'll go on record saying that I don't believe that for a minute, nevertheless, supposing that it's so, why did you wait until after you'd made me fall for you to let me know?"

Here was his chance, he thought, to make her let go, to send her away for good. "Look, Lisa, I know you think this is all about something deep. It's not. The truth is, I wanted you. I'm selfish like that. You're a hot babe, and I just wanted to see if I could get you. That's all there is to it."

If he'd physically struck her it would've been easier to take. She stepped back at the harsh words, looked up at him in disbelief.

He shrugged. "Look, I've gotta get going." He looked away then back at her. "There is something I wanted to discuss with you."

Her voice wavered. "What? What more could you have to say?"

He cleared his throat. He had been about to ask her about the plans for his ranch, but suddenly, it didn't seem the right time anymore. So, he'd improvise.

"I, uh, just wanted to say that whatever Miss Maddie needs, I'll take care of it."

He watched as color filled her cheeks.

"Just what makes you think I need your help taking care of MY grandmother? Huh? And just answer me this, Chaz, who will take care of *me*? Huh? Is anyone in my entire freaking life ever gonna take care of *me*?"

His mouth fell open. "Lisa, I..."

She stopped him as a tear escaped. "Don't pay any attention to what I just said. I had a moment of weakness and self-pity, that's all." She brushed at the moisture on her cheek with the back of her hand, gave a mocking laugh. "I really hate self-pity. You can be assured that I'll be fine. I have Grams and Joe and I'll just be absolutely fine."

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Lisa's eyes flew open. She'd been in a deep sleep, but something woke her. Had she heard something? She sat up. "Dixie?" The kitten nudged her thigh. Lisa scooped her up. "Hi there, little one." She lay back down, placing Dixie on the pillow next to hers. "There now. You go back to sleep. Everything's okay." Yawning, she turned onto her back and stretched just as a gloved hand slapped over her nose and mouth.

Arms and legs flew out in startled reflex. Her hands went immediately to the hand that held her down, trying to pry it away from her nose. The dark figure above her leaned forward.

"Don't scream or you might wake the little lady downstairs and then I might have to hurt her. You wouldn't want that to happen, would you?"

She shook her head as much as she could while he held her. He immediately let her go and she sucked in air. She tried to get up, but he held her down with one hand braced on her chest. He gave her a push, causing the bed to bounce.

"Be still."

The voice was raspy, gruff. Lisa looked up, her eyes wild with panic, trying to see who it was that held her.

When she didn't stop struggling to rise, he grabbed her hands and pinned them above her head with one of his. He looked her over.

Lisa struggled when he stretched his body out on top of her. "Not bad," he said, his voice more breathy than the first time he'd spoken.

Tears gathered in Lisa's eyes. She was terrified. "Please don't do this," she begged.

He stood, placed his hand back over her mouth and spoke softly. "I said, be quiet. Just listen. Leave here, Lisa. Go far away. Go, and don't look back. Take your city ways and your stupid ideas and leave. There's nothing here for you except pain. This is a warning. Next time you won't fare so well."

She realized she was screaming, but hardly a muffled sound got past his hand. Her eyes, wide with fear, blinked frantically as they focused on a shiny blade.

"Like I said, this is merely a warning. Sorry, but it has to be done. I need you to know that I'm not playing around. I'm quite serious."

The knife zinged across her upper arm laying it open. Searing pain shot through her. Her world tilted. Vision became fuzzy. And then he was gone. She reached madly for her cell phone, but couldn't get her

arm to do what she wanted. When she reached for it with her other hand, she toppled out of the bed. The phone landed beside her and she grabbed it up.

"Nine one-one. What is your emergency?"

She drew a deep breath. "Please, help. Someone broke in, and he cut me with a knife. Please, help."

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"What?" Chaz said curtly into the phone as he glanced at the clock. "It's two in the morning."

"Listen, Chaz, it's Tyson. There's just been a call and someone broke into the Lewis place and assaulted Lisa. I'm not there yet. They say she's been stabbed."

He sprang out of bed, and quickly grabbed his jeans. "Did you call mom?"

"Sorry, she's in Atlanta. You're on your own."

He threw the phone down and flew around the room. He dressed in under two minutes, jumped into his Jeep and was gone. They were next door neighbors so why did it seem to take for freaking ever to get there? He swung in through the gate. Cops were already inside the house. He came to a screeching halt, bounded up the porch steps and dashed inside.

"Where is she?"

"She's upstairs," a uniform from the county answered. "Uh, hold on, you can't..."

"He's okay," another officer said. "That's Chaz Stewart. Used to be a paramedic."

Chaz got to the room and came to a halt in the doorway. Blood soaked a pillow lying on the floor, and the side of the bed and she was alive. She was lying on the bed. A county officer held a towel against her arm. When she saw him she tried to get up.

"Stay down," Chaz said softly, moving forward. He laid a hand gently against her shoulder and she sank back against the bed. He nodded at the uniform. "I've got it."

"Paramedics should be here any minute, Chaz," the officer said.

Chaz nodded at him as he took over applying pressure on the wound. "How bad is it?" he asked, not wanting to relinquish pressure long enough to look at it.

"Pretty deep wound, Chaz. Vertical, maybe a full inch deep, the width of her arm."

"Okay, can you get some blankets, please." He looked into her eyes, smiled. "Hey there."

"Chaz..." She looked up at him, not able to get anything else out because her heart swelled with emotion. The only thing she knew was, she was so relieved and grateful that he had come. His powerful presence, his strength, the warmth in his tone, she was immediately comforted. The fear and confusion seemed gone.

"You're okay. Everything's gonna be okay." He bent down and kissed her forehead. "You're doing real good, sweetheart. Oops, don't close your eyes. Stay with me now, Lisa," he said sternly. "I need you to keep your eyes open and look at me. You're in some pain?"

She nodded. "Yeah, it hurts. Chaz, will you just— hold me?"

He sat on the bed and his arms went around her. "Okay, hon. I'm here." Her body began to shiver and he leaned closer to keep her warm. "Lisa," he said quietly. "Were you raped?"

"No. I thought he was going to, but he didn't."

Chaz sighed with relief. "So, he attacked you, cut you and left?"

Her body trembled violently. "He told me to go away. To go away and not come back."

He took her pulse. "I bet you told him to shove it."

She laughed softly. She'd just been assaulted in her own bed in her own home and she felt wonderful. Why? Because Chaz was here, talking to her as if he cared about her, and she knew that made her happy because she loved him. She snuggled against his chest, trying to get closer to his warmth. "The police said Grams was okay. Did you see her?"

"She was speaking to an officer when I came through the door. I'm sure she's frantically worried about you."

At that moment the paramedics arrived and Chaz stood aside.

"You sure?" the paramedic asked pointedly at Chaz. "She's yours if you want."

Chaz eyed Robert, a former co-worker, as he briefly entertained the thought of tending to Lisa himself. "No. You two go ahead. I want her to have the best care."

Robert shook his head at Chaz, but this was not the time to have the same old argument with him.

Tim, another one of Chaz's friends and former co-workers, knelt down next to Lisa and took over. Chaz stood by and watched. All he could think was, she's alive. She's alive. His eyes met hers. It seemed

she could see straight into his soul and he knew that she knew he truly did care for her. He hadn't been able to hide it, hadn't even thought to hide it until now.

He watched as his friends took care of her. Her face was pale. Her lips trembled as she spoke to Tim. They started an IV on her. When he realized they were getting ready to transport, he moved forward. "Lisa, they're gonna take you into the hospital. I'll be right behind. I promise, you won't be alone."

"Thank you." Her eyes fluttered closed. "I'm so tired."

"That's the shock, baby." He looked worriedly up at Tim.

"We got her, Chaz. We'll take good care of her."

Chaz made his way downstairs. Maddie came to him and he leaned down and hugged her. "She's okay, Maddie. Her arm is cut, but she's okay. They're gonna take her in and stitch her up. I'll take you to the hospital."

"Thank you, Chaz. I'll get dressed. I won't be a minute."

Chaz stepped out onto the porch to see Tyson speaking with the Pine County police. He moved to his side. "What do you know?"

"Came in through the dining room window. Lisa said he was dressed in black. Black mask. Black gloves. Said the cut was to warn her he meant business. Told her to leave and not look back."

Chaz shook his head. "Who would do this? Who would care that Lisa is living here with Maddie?"

Tyson's eyes narrowed as he thought. "She's stepping on someone's toes. Someone is jealous maybe? I'd say someone like Megan if I didn't know better. Suddenly, there's a gorgeous new girl in town, come to steal her father's attention."

"Megan is happy to have a new sister. Besides they're practically twins. Looks-wise Megan has nothing to be jealous of. Unless she's a really good actress, I believe she's truly happy Joe finally found his long-lost daughter."

"Like I said, if I didn't know better. But, what about Andrea? Now, there's someone I wouldn't put it past."

"Yeah, Andrea would be more likely than Megan, but the perp was a man."

"Andrea could get anyone to do anything for her. Take her brother, for example."

As if on cue a blue BMW swung through the gate, came to a stop. Marcus climbed out, made his way toward Chaz and Tyson.

"What are you doing here?" Chaz asked.

He shrugged nonchalantly. "Maddie's my neighbor too. I saw the lights and came to see what all the activity is about." He looked toward the house. "Everyone okay?"

Tyson watched the man carefully as he spoke. "Well, Marcus, someone broke in."

"Really? What'd they take?"

"Nothing, but Lisa was hurt."

"Lisa? Is she okay?"

"She's being transported to the hospital."

Marcus shook his head. "How serious is it?"

Chaz's eyes pinned him down. "Why?"

Marcus looked him straight in the eye. "Well, for one, like I said, we're neighbors, and number two, she and I have a date a week from Saturday. We're going to the Fox. So how bad is she hurt?"

Chaz just could not bring himself to deal with Marcus at this moment. "I have to get Maddie to the hospital." He nodded at his brother. "Ty, keep me up to date."

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Chaz shifted positions, trying to get comfortable in the waiting room chairs. They would only let one person at a time back with Lisa. Ridiculous. They knew him here, but old "Nurse Hatchett" wouldn't budge, so, he'd let Maddie go in first. He was beginning to wonder if she even intended to come back out and let him have a turn. He shifted again, leaned his head in his hands and closed his eyes.

He was supposed to be driving Lisa away from him for her own good. He'd intended to make her think he'd played with her affections and then callously tossed her aside. She'd be better off without him. She needed a man who could be there for her, focus on her. Not someone with his kind of baggage. She needed someone who could make love to her and not see another woman, a dead woman, in his head. Yet, his plan to drive her away wasn't working out too well. The moment he'd entered her bedroom she'd known he was there because he cared for her. She'd tried to rise up and get to him which told him she needed him as much as he needed her and just what the heck was he supposed to do about that?

Maddie finally approached, whispering that he could go back now. He did so quickly. She was sleeping. His eyes went to the bandage on her upper arm. A small dot of blood had already soaked through. That's

not good. It shouldn't still be bleeding that much. He looked up at her face. She was awake and smiling at him.

"Hey," he said softly.

"Hey," she said back, mimicking his southern accent.

"How are you feeling?"

"I feel wonderful."

His brow knit in confusion. Wonderful? Maybe they gave her something for pain. He looked down at her arm. The tiny dot of blood had grown to about the size of a quarter. Maybe he should get the doctor to take a look at it.

He looked back at her face. "I can't tell you how scared I was for you, when Ty called me."

"Oh, Chaz, you don't ever have to worry about me."

She wasn't making any sense. He looked closer at her face. "What's this?" he asked, brushing at a tiny scratch on her forehead.

But as he touched the scratch it started to bleed. "What the hell?" He glanced back down to her arm, the bandage was now completely red, rivulets of blood running down her arm toward her wrist. "I have to get the doctor." When he looked back at her face the tiny scratch was pouring blood. It ran down her face, into her eyes. It began to run faster and faster. Then it was like a geyser pumping out of the top of her head.

He stumbled back away from her and slipped in a pool of red. Looking down at his feet, he watched in horror as the blood bubbled up around them. Then suddenly he was swimming in it, trying to keep from going under. He couldn't see Lisa anymore. He only knew he had to keep afloat. If he panicked he would die. He could hear a voice from far away calling him. He swam toward it as the voice got louder and louder. Then he realized, it's a dream. This is a dream. Relief swept over him with the realization.

His eyes flew open. His mother and father stood over him in the waiting room.

"Chaz, are you okay, honey?" Patricia Stewart asked.

He stood, scrubbing his hands over his face. Looked back and forth between his mother and father as he got his bearings.

"Chaz?" his mother asked again, worry and concern etched in the soft lines of her face.

"No, Mom, I'm not. I'm not okay and I don't know what I'm gonna do about it," he said, his voice choked with emotion.

His mother stood on her toes and wrapped her arms around him. "We'll work it out. We'll get you help. Don't give up."

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Psalm 11:5

"The Lord tests the righteous and the wicked, and the one who loves violence his soul hates."

Chapter 10

Lisa opened her eyes at the soft knock on the hospital room door. Chaz's face peeked around the corner.

"Hi," she said softly, smiling up at him.

"Hey." Swallowing hard, his eyes darted to the bandage on her arm. No blood. "Are you feeling okay?"

She nodded. "They gave me something for pain. Twenty-eight stitches. Have to keep my arm in a sling for a while."

He nodded, shoved his hands in his pockets. "So, doc says you can go. I'll be happy to drive you and Miss Maddie home, um, unless you'd rather go home with Joe. He's on his way."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, I forgot about my father! Did you call him?"

"Maddie did."

She shook her head. "I'm not used to having people around I can depend on, I mean like when something bad happens."

"Well, you do have people, Lisa. You have lots of people. Maddie says your dad totally freaked out. She had to do some fast talking to calm him down."

"If he's on his way, I shouldn't leave without seeing him."

Chaz nodded. "I understand. Well..."

"I'm afraid, Chaz."

He stopped, breathed. "Afraid? Of going home and living at that house? Maddie and I had a long talk. We're gonna install new locks, alarms. We'll make the house impenetrable. We won't let this..."

"I mean I'm afraid of not having you in my life."

He turned away, ran a hand through his hair. He turned back to see her gazing steadily at him. "I don't know what to say, Lisa. I need to work some things out."

Miserable, Lisa thought. He looked absolutely miserable. Yet, him saying he had to work some things out was a huge jump from wham, bam, thank you ma'am, so she smiled at the progress. "I won't pressure you," she said. "And I will accept that ride home after I see my father."

Breathing a sigh of relief, he nodded.

"Do the police have any idea who did this?" she asked.

"Nothing solid yet. Tyson's working with the local police."

"Do you think Maddie will be in danger if I defy this jerk and stick around? Which of course, I intend to do. I just found home, I'm not leaving anytime soon."

"I don't know what to think. I do know I'd worry more about Maddie with you gone than with you living in her house."

"Okay, so, the impact the new inn will have on the town, did I miss something? Whose toes will I be walking on? Is there another inn? A motel maybe, that feels I would be stealing their business?"

Chaz thought. "There's a motel, though it's not in the city limits. It's out on the state highway. *Magnolia Garden*. Just a hole in the wall, really. Most of their business comes from the bar next door and vice versa. You bringing in some tourism could only help them."

She grimaced, raised a hand to her head.

He came forward, took her hand. "Headache?"

"Uh uh. Dizzy. I think the painkillers they gave me are getting to me. I just want to go home and sleep."

"Soon, baby."

She smiled and contentedly closed her eyes.

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Lisa Lewis. Thinking of her made him want to slam his fist through a wall. To think he'd been engaged to her. To think of all the money he'd spent on her. Fancy restaurants. Shopping trips. Stupid romantic gestures. All for nothing.

Everything in his life had gone bad and it was all because of her. Why did she have to come home early that day? And then, did she have to go bonkers? Pulling a gun on him– for that alone he should have beat her to a pulp when he'd had the chance.

Once Lisa missed the dinner party his life had been hell. Lou freaked. The board freaked. It wasn't enough that he'd flown to that God forsaken state to pick up Lou's precious car and driven all the way back to Los Angeles. What did he get for that? He got to run out of gas— twice.

He'd known the inevitable was coming, when Lou didn't recommend him for the VP position. He'd known it was just a matter of time before she'd like to put the entire episode behind her, and when Lou put things behind her, that was where they remained. Lisa was behind her. And now he was. Fired. Let go. Terminated. He didn't

really hold it against Lou. It's just business for her. He actually had a grudging respect for her, even though he was mad at her at the moment. But Lisa. Gorgeous, sweet, Lisa. Poor little put upon Lisa. Self-righteous, prude, Lisa.

As he drove he smiled at the memory of backhanding her across that smug little face. He'd put all he had into it and it had felt good. Next time, and there would be a next time, there wouldn't be any reason to hurry. Turning onto the interstate, he pointed his Jaguar east. Oh, yes, he fully intended to work her over good. Maybe even draw blood. Definitely get a final piece of what used to belong to him.

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Maddie pushed the front screen door open with her hip and came out onto the porch, tray in hand. "Here you go, now. Y'all have been working so hard. Take a break and have some iced tea."

Joe, Chaz, Charles and Tyson quickly took Maddie up on her offer. They nodded in gratitude. Chaz slumped onto the porch swing, his father dropped into a rocker, while Tyson and Joe sat heavily on the steps.

They were quiet while they quenched their thirst. It was Joe who finally spoke.

"I used to think murder was something beyond my reach, you know? I couldn't understand how a man could possibly be crazy enough to take another man's life. But I tell ya..." He stopped and shook his head. "I could kill the man who hurt Lisa. I could tear him apart with my bare hands."

Chaz understood Joe's need completely, but didn't let on. Instead, he looked over at his little brother. "Tyson, any more leads?"

"Well, now, if there were, after Joe's little speech I'm not real inclined to say."

"Come on, Ty, then you do have something?" Charles asked.

"You gotta let me in on it," Joe said.

"When I have more information, I'll fill you in. Right now, I have a few ideas running through my head. I need more than an idea to accuse someone though, but, you really need to stop with the vigilante talk."

"I know. I'm just venting a little. I just want her safe. This guy threatened her, told her to leave and she says she's pretty well dug in. I want her safe. I tried to talk her and Maddie both into staying with Shirley and me but they won't budge. It's making me crazy."

"Well, now that we've installed the new windows and doors and the alarm system I'm feeling a lot better about these women living here alone," Charles said.

"Oh, piddle," Maddie proclaimed. "I've been living alone in this big old house for years."

"Well, I'd say circumstances have changed, Miss Maddie," Charles answered.

"I suppose you're right, but I'm not leaving my home and no one is gonna tell me my granddaughter can't stay here in her home where she belongs."

The screen door opened and Lisa stepped out. Maddie, Chaz and Joe all jumped to their feet.

"Oh, dear, Lisa, do you think you should be up?" Maddie asked.

"I've been in bed for two days drugged up on painkillers. All they do is make me sleep, so I'm not taking any more. I feel like I'm going crazy."

Chaz took her arm and led her to an empty rocking chair. She looked up at him, smiled. He backed away, sat back on the swing. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine. Lucky."

"Lucky?" Tyson laughed. "Explain that one."

She shrugged. "Well, I mean, I'm alive. I'm surrounded by people that I love and care for and those people are taking such good care of me. I feel lucky."

"That's a terrific positive attitude," Charles said.

Chaz smiled at Lisa, pride in his eyes. Yet he knew he had no right to feel that way. She wasn't his and may never be.

"Are Megan and Shirley still coming over?" Lisa asked.

"Yes, in a few hours. You girls sure are getting pally," Joe said.

"Yes we are, aren't we? Isn't it wonderful?"

"It is," Joe said softly.

"Lisa," Tyson butted in. "If you don't mind and if you feel up to it, I'd like to ask you a few questions."

"No, I don't mind."

"We can go somewhere private if you'd like."

"That's okay," she said looking around. "I consider everyone here family."

He nodded. "Chaz told me you had a fiancé. That the two of you broke it off under less than congenial conditions."

Lisa paled, suddenly wishing she'd taken him up on the privacy bid. She hadn't thought he would question her about her former life. She looked over at Chaz who appeared apologetic. She sighed. "Less than congenial would be an understatement."

Tyson nodded. "He was the one who came here to collect the car from you, correct?"

"Yes."

"Chaz said he hit you pretty hard."

"Yes," she said again, softer.

"Son of a— who is this guy?" Joe said, coming to his feet.

"It's okay," she hesitated. "It's okay, Dad."

The softly spoken word stopped him in his tracks. He looked down at the porch steps, hands on hips, working to get his temper under control. Finally he looked back up at his daughter. "It's not okay, Lisa. It's not okay when a man hits a woman."

She smiled at him. "Well, I bloodied his nose once. Does that make it better?"

"Good girl," Charles said.

"It'll make it better when *I* bloody his nose," Joe muttered.

Ty smiled at Joe's red-headed tendency to lose his temper, and then continued. "Lisa, I'm gonna need his name, picture of him and make and model of his car."

"Fine, but it wasn't him."

"You can't know that for sure. He had motive and you stated earlier that you didn't get a look at the guy. He wore a mask, right?"

"Well, yes, but I'm sure it wasn't him. This guy was larger. Much larger. Glen is only five-ten and not very heavy, but when this guy was on top of me..."

"On top of you?" Chaz broke in. "You didn't say that before."

She shrugged. "I didn't think about it before. See, I was fighting him, trying to get away so that I could get to my gun..."

"You have a gun," all three men asked at the same time.

Lisa frowned. "If you guys keep interrupting me I'll never get the story out."

"Everyone shut up," Tyson ordered. "Now, Lisa, you were fighting him and..."

"And he laid on top of me, I think to use his body to hold me still so that he could free his hands to do other things, like you know, pull out his knife and slice me open." She'd started out trying to make a

sarcastic remark and was surprised when her voice broke.

"Okay, hon, take a breath. Would you like something to drink?" Tyson asked softly.

Maddie jumped up. "I'll get you something, dear."

Lisa watched her go inside before she turned back. Four men peered at her compassionately.

"Lisa," Tyson said gently. "I know you stated earlier that you weren't raped. If you were too embarrassed to tell the truth, it's okay, but you need to tell me now."

"No, no really, he didn't touch me in that way at all. I admit, he scared me. I thought he was gonna rape me, but apparently, that wasn't on his mind."

Chaz's eyes closed.

"Thank God for that," Joe muttered.

"So what happened then?" Tyson continued.

"Then he told me to get out of this town, apologized for what he was about to do and you know the rest. He was like, um, angry. He seemed mad at me. Like I'd done something personal to him."

"Which brings us back to your ex-fiancé."

"It wasn't him."

"Nevertheless I want his information." He stood and retrieved a small pad and pen from his car.

Lisa wrote the information down. Maddie came back out with a plate of cookies and some tea for Lisa.

"I wanna know about the gun," Charles said, a twinkle in his eye.

Lisa grinned at him. "It's nothing special. A Derringer. D-thirty-eight double action. I've only pulled it once before and that was to order Glen out of my home."

"Why did you order him out of your home?" Tyson asked.

"We lived together in a penthouse apartment in Los Angeles. I caught him..." she stopped to choose her words carefully, because no one needed to know the dirty details. "He was having an affair and I caught him. I ordered him out. He wasn't inclined to leave on his own so, I motivated him."

"You're a feisty little thing, ain't ya," Charles said, grinning.

"I suppose I am," she said, grinning right back at him.

Charles nodded at Chaz. "I like this girl just fine."

Chaz looked down. How could he tell his father that he liked her too, liked her just fine, but he was too broken a man to do anything

about it. The only thing he'd done was hurt her. He'd almost convinced her that all he'd wanted to do was win her, but she'd seen right through him. He looked up to find Lisa's eyes on him.

"I really could use some exercise, Chaz. Would you like to go for a walk?"

He cleared his throat. Scrambled to his feet. "I, uh, sure."

Charlie watched his eldest son as he escorted Lisa down the porch steps.

"He's interested, huh?" Joe asked, once the kids had moved out of sight.

"He is. I'm hoping she's just what he needs to get past everything." He eyed Joe. "You got any problems with that?"

Joe smiled. "Couldn't think of a better situation than to have my daughter fall in love with a local boy, get married and stick around to give me grandchildren. And I couldn't think of a better man than your son." He glanced over at Tyson. "Other than your other son."

Charlie nodded with a smile. "I like that you see it that way."

Tyson sighed and shook his head. "If only I'd seen her first."

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"Which way?" Lisa asked.

Chaz gestured toward the back of the house. "Ever been down to the creek? It's real pretty down there."

"I'm game." She turned to walk, holding her injured arm with her right hand to keep it from jarring too much.

They walked in silence down the side yard, past the vegetable garden toward the terraced flower garden. Lisa smiled at the yellow and gold colored flowers. She knew they were marigolds. There were some daisy looking plants, and something purple Grams had said were great because they didn't need much water. On the lower terrace, more in the shade were a rainbow of colors. Lisa couldn't remember what they were called. Something about patience. She only remembered they do well in the shade.

Chaz placed a hand on her lower back to help propel her up the hill, but removed it quickly. He hadn't expected the sudden jolt. They headed past the pecan grove and into the woods. Sneaking glances at her as they walked, he tried to assess her health. Her face was definitely pale and she'd lost weight, but her eyes were bright. She was as beautiful as ever, even dressed so casually, with her hair braided back and the loose lounge clothing she wore.

Lisa looked up at him. "All this time I've spent lying around doing nothing, it's given me plenty of time to think."

"And?"

"And I was thinking about something you said."

"What was that?"

"You said you had some things to work out. You suggested, at least in my mind, that once you took care of those things then you and me could be a possibility."

Sighing, he reached up and rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know what to say, Lisa."

She chuckled. "You know, Chaz, you making me beg is not good for my self-esteem, or what's left of it."

"Lisa, I'm sorry I hurt you. I didn't mean for things to turn out like they did."

"Yeah, you said that the other day. Funny thing is, I believe you. I don't know why I do, but I do. Look, Chaz, is it some sort of fear of commitment? I know a lot of men have a real problem with that. I wouldn't pressure you. I mean, I've just come from a crappy relationship myself, as you well know. We could just take it sl..."

"I'm not afraid of commitment."

She looked up at him, the frustration mounting. "Okay." She waited to see if he intended to tell her what the problem was, but he continued walking silently so she sighed and forged on. "I've gone over everything, every detail in my mind again and again. I mean, like, I met you on a Tuesday afternoon. Not twenty-four hours later, on Wednesday morning, you kissed me. And then you kissed me again on Friday morning, remember, when I fought with Glen and you carried me inside?"

"Geez, Lisa, of course I remember, and let me point out that it wasn't just me kissing you. You were feeling it. You were as much into it as me."

"I'm not denying that and that's not the direction I was headed. Now, don't interrupt." She drew a deep breath. "So, that very Friday, you take me to the social and afterward, well, you know what happened. I'd known you for three days. Three days! And if we hadn't been interrupted, I'm pretty sure I would've given myself to you, a virtual stranger, that very night, in that little Sunday School room, right next to a picture of Jesus surrounded by little children."

Chaz swallowed hard, remembering the passion. He started to

speak but she held up her hand.

"That is so not me, Chaz. I swear I don't go around making out with men I've just met. You'll just have to believe me on that. I mean, Glen always said I was a prude. I guess he's right. Still, you Chaz, you weren't just anyone. It's so cliché I know, but I felt as if I'd known you a long time. No one has ever made me feel the way you make me feel. I've never had such an instant attraction to anyone. So I knew, even though I'd only known you a short time, that you were special."

"Guess you were wrong there."

She stopped in the middle of the forest and swung around, fire in her eyes. "I'll let you know when it's your turn to speak."

He bit his lip to keep from smiling.

"Now, where was I, oh yeah, so I knew you were special. When you asked me to watch the stars with you, I knew what was up. I knew it would probably lead to another makeout session at the very least. I could have turned you down but I wanted to be close to you. Honestly, I actually wanted you to make love to me. I wanted you and even though we didn't quite get to the making love part, it was wonderful. You were wonderful. Now, don't you think after what we've already shared, I mean, after the closeness we've shared, that at the very least, I deserve some sort of explanation?"

He sighed. "I..."

"Wait. I'm not finished. I've tried to figure it out. I even tried to accept your sloppy attempt at making me hate you. Then, when you showed up to take care of me when this happened," she said, slightly raising her arm, "I could see the truth in your eyes."

They walked in silence for several moments.

"Well? Aren't you gonna say anything?"

He looked up. "I didn't know it was my turn yet."

Her eyes narrowed.

He laughed. "Sorry. Lisa, yes, I think you deserve an explanation. I..." He stopped to draw a deep breath. "That night in your truck, you're right, it was wonderful. You were wonderful. All the way until the very end, when..." He stopped. There was no way he could tell her what he'd seen. He shook his head. "Look, Lisa, please believe me when I say that it had nothing to do with you. I have a problem. I thought I had it licked."

They came upon a large rock and Lisa sat down to rest. She looked up at him, her expression soft and compelling.

"What happened at the end, Chaz?"

She sat silently, giving him the time he needed to express himself. He was grateful for her kindness, her willingness to understand and for just a moment he thought he could speak the words. "I was with you and then– and then I wasn't." He looked at her, her face turned up to him, listening to him with eager anticipation. He closed his eyes against the moisture that gathered. Nope, he couldn't talk about this.

Lisa watched his face, trying to read what he was trying to say. And then it hit her. He served time in Iraq. This must have something to do with that, with the war. "Chaz," she said gently. "If this has something to do with the war, you know like post-traumatic stress kind of stuff, it can be worked through."

His eyes shuttered. "Lisa, I really can't talk about this now. Please try to understand."

She nodded and sighed. "Okay. I do understand."

They sat in silence for several minutes and finally she asked. "So, how much farther is the creek?"

He stood, pointed. "This way."

She gazed at her surroundings as they walked. "I've just realized that we've been walking through the woods and I'm not even afraid."

He cocked a brow. "Are you usually afraid of the woods?"

"I've never actually been in the woods. From the outside they seem really scary." She looked around. "But it's actually quite lovely, isn't it? Peaceful. Quiet. I like it here."

He smiled at her, pointed ahead. "And there is your creek."

They emerged onto a rocky bank, covered with leaves and sticks from all the surrounding trees. The water wasn't a bubbling mountain spring like she'd imagined, but a smooth flowing stream about twenty feet across. The trees from the forest loomed overhead, blocking out most of the direct sunlight, making the air cool and serene.

"Oh, it's really nice here," she said, sitting down to remove her sandals. In only a few seconds she was standing in the water.

Chaz watched her and as he did he realized that the strong pull had not dissipated. Not even a little. He still wanted her. Desperately. Yet, there was no way he could chance it. He had to keep his distance until he had control of his faculties. Would he lose her? He couldn't blame her if she moved on, but then he remembered Marcus.

"Lisa?"

She looked up smiling.

"I hear you're going out with Marcus next Saturday."

She shrugged. "Yeah. A ballet at the Fox theater. I hear the Fox is really something. Who told you?"

"He did."

"When?"

"He came by the night you were hurt. He said he wanted to see what all the excitement was about."

"Oh, that was nice of him."

He frowned. "There isn't a nice bone in his body."

She looked up in surprise and climbed onto the bank. "Why do you say that?"

"Just take my word for it."

"Well, no offense, sweetheart, but at this moment your word with me isn't very reputable."

He nodded. "I get that, but really, Lisa, I'm serious. What if I asked you to not go out with him?"

"You got a better offer?" She asked, standing toe to toe with him.

He looked down. "Will you give that a rest?"

"I guess that's a 'no'. So the answer to your question is; I'd tell you to go... " She stopped herself from saying something ugly. "I'd tell you to mind your own business."

He took her by the shoulders. She gasped in pain. Letting go immediately, he stepped back. "Oh, Lisa, I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I'm okay. Really."

He shook his head. "I can't seem to do anything right."

Reaching out, she touched his shoulder. "That's not true. You do almost everything right." She smiled at him. "Look, Chaz, if you don't want me to go out with Marcus and you say the reason is a good one, I'll trust you, and I won't go out with him again. But I've already told him I would go this time, he already has tickets and so, I will be going to the Fox."

He shook his head and sighed heavily. "Just be careful."

"I'm always careful," she said with a mischievous smile. "Except where you're concerned."

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Ephesians 4:32

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

Chapter 11

"Who's this little guy?" Marcus asked, bending to scoop up the tiny kitten.

Lisa laughed. "That little guy is a gal and her name is Dixie. Chaz gave her to me. Isn't she adorable?"

He held her up, looking her over carefully. "Just the word I was thinking." Setting the kitten gently on the floor, Marcus looked up at Lisa. "You look amazing," he said sincerely, his eyes running over the short, blue knit dress. It hugged every inch of her body. She wore silver heels and a large silver clasp held her hair off her neck. Her jewelry was understated, classy, like her. He could see himself marrying someone like her. Not some hick slut, but a class act with enough fire to make her interesting. She definitely wouldn't be difficult to wake up to every morning. She seemed to like him and he didn't think she was faking it. She probably never expected to find someone as sophisticated as he is right here in the middle of nowhere.

"Thank you," she answered, smiling sweetly.

He held out a bouquet of yellow and pink flowers. "I brought these for Miss Maddie."

"Oh, how sweet. Grams, come see what Marcus brought for you," Lisa called.

Maddie came hurrying into the front room. "My, my, how beautiful. For me? Oh, my goodness, why thank you, Marcus." She took the flowers and inhaled. "Lovely. Just lovely. And how is Andrea doing?"

"She's been spending a lot of time with some old high school friends. Shopping mostly."

Lisa searched for something positive to say. "Your sister is a very pretty girl."

"Oh, she's a looker all right. It makes it hard for a big brother to look after her."

Lisa didn't mention that the girl had been a real nuisance, but no wonder she was. Grams had told her that their parents were dead. Any girl would have a hard time with that. Marcus took care of his sister. A

glowing quality. She wondered why Chaz hated him so much. "Well, I think it's very nice, the way you look after your sister."

"Thanks. It's a good thing I've done so well in real estate. She can max out a credit card as fast as you can say 'I'll take it.'"

"I just realized we never talked about what you do. You're in real estate? I don't know why I assumed you were into ranching also."

"Oh, no, too much like work." He laughed. "We haven't had cattle on our land since my grandfather was a young man. I've learned, you want to be rich, real estate is the way to go."

"Well, shall we go?"

"By all means."

As they headed out Lisa couldn't help but wonder about the words Chaz had said. "He hasn't got a nice bone in his body." Why would Chaz say that? Were he and Marcus lifelong rivals? She couldn't understand it. Marcus seemed very nice, and charming too.

They ate at a small Italian restaurant. Marcus was cleverly entertaining and the entire meal was lovely.

"So, what have you decided to do?" Marcus asked as they casually sipped their wine.

"Do?"

"I mean, since you were attacked and told to leave. Are you heading back to Los Angeles?"

"No way. I'm not gonna let some pervert scare me away from the first home I've ever known. Why? Do you want me to go?"

"Heavens no. I'd love you to stay, but it would be selfish of me to want you to stay when it puts you in danger."

She shrugged. "Well, there is really no question in my mind. I'm staying. Maddie and I are gonna open our little country inn and no one is gonna keep me from it."

He drew a breath. "I just hope I'll be there the next time something happens." He took a sip of wine. "So, do the police have any idea who attacked you?"

"If they do then they're not telling."

"Don't you find it odd, Lisa, that Chaz Stewart was there almost right after it happened?"

"Odd? No. Why? You're not saying he could've been the one?"

He shrugged. "It just seems odd to me."

Lisa suddenly became very uncomfortable. Chaz wouldn't hurt her. Not physically anyway. The only thing she thought odd was

Marcus trying to make her think that Chaz could be the man who'd attacked her. That was ludicrous. Then again, Chaz did keep insisting he had a problem he couldn't tell her about.

Marcus smiled at her and before she could avoid it politely, he reached across the table and took her hand. She tugged slightly, but he didn't take the hint.

"You are so very lovely, Lisa."

She smiled sweetly. "Thank you. What time is curtain?"

"In about thirty minutes. There's no hurry. The Fox is just down the street." He turned her hand over, his thumb stroking her wrist.

He looked up into her eyes. "There's something about you, Lisa. You make a man want to— do things."

She laughed. "So I've been told." Tugging again, she was finally able to get him to release her hand. She sighed in relief. It's not that he hadn't been charming and entertaining, it was just that, well, she wasn't feeling anything more than friendship, and she certainly didn't like being pressured.

He paid the bill and they moved on to the theater. Lisa was completely taken by the beauty and romance of the historical Fox Theater. If she were still a little girl she would've pretended she was a princess in a castle.

They purchased wine and took their seats and Marcus went back to being the charming southern gentleman, telling her of plays he'd attended at the Fox, celebrities he'd met. He was quick-witted and made her laugh.

Lisa thoroughly enjoyed the ballet, especially the part when Ophelia throws herself into the river. They'd actually used real water for a makeshift stream, right there on the stage, enhancing the drama. Gripping the edge of her chair, she leaned forward and realized it was a mistake as she felt Marcus' arm slide across her back. It was merely a warm gesture on his part, she thought, so why did it bother her so much? Maybe, like Glen always said, she really is a prude.

"You okay?" he whispered.

"Of course I am," she whispered back. Did he think she was upset by the sad story line?

His hand rubbed up and down her back. She leaned back again, hoping he would simply stop touching her. Instead, though, he moved his arm, resting it across her shoulders. She winced at the pressure on her hurt arm.

"Oh, sorry," he said softly. "Maybe this is better." He rearranged his arm so that his hand rested at the back of her neck. His fingers played with the hair at the nape of her neck.

This is silly, she thought. Obviously, he was feeling things she wasn't. She should make a joke or something, lighten things up. She turned to him intending to do just that. It happened so fast. His hand gripped her neck and pressed her forward and he laid his mouth on hers. She pulled away quickly. He smiled at her as if he were a proud little boy who'd stolen his first kiss.

She felt her temper stir and turned to him intending to set him straight, but he beat her to it.

"I'm sorry, Lisa. You're so beautiful, I lost control."

"Huh, good excuse."

"Aw, come on now, don't be angry. I've never met anyone like you, Lisa. You're an amazing looking woman. It feels like I've known you forever. Besides, your perfume is getting to me."

This is ridiculous, she thought. Yet, to be fair, wasn't that the same thing she'd been thinking about Chaz? It feels like I've known you forever? She sighed. "Well, you haven't known me forever so let's just keep our hands to ourselves," she said with a smile. What else could she do? All she knew is, she had no desire to fight off his unwanted advances all night. He seemed to settle down though, and she did her best to salvage the evening and enjoy the rest of the ballet.

Before he took her home, they stopped at a trendy Buckhead club for a drink and some dessert. A young man played acoustic guitar and sang beautiful original songs. Lisa made a mental note of his name. Talon Ahnan. Someone to keep in mind for special entertainment at her new inn.

On the long drive home, they chatted about numerous subjects. It was pleasant and it seemed Marcus had lost all thoughts of pawing at her. At least that was what she'd thought right up until the time they approached her home and instead of turning in, he drove past her gate. "Where are we going?" she asked.

"I thought you might like to see my property. There's a small lake that is lovely in the moonlight." Licking his lips in anticipation of getting her alone, he had to smile.

Lisa wasn't so naive that she didn't realize he was at it again. "Marcus, I'm really tired and it is getting late."

"We won't be long. We'll just swing in for a moment."

He turned in between two large brick pillars with "Winstead" engraved on an iron plaque. Lit from the outside, the house was breathtaking. Large and brick and pillared, it screamed money. They drove past the house, down a winding drive until they came to a lake.

He pulled up and stopped, did a sweeping motion with his hand. "Great, isn't it?"

Lisa stared through the windshield out over the lake. "It's a very pretty spot."

When she turned back to look at him her heart skipped a beat. The look of desire and passion in his eyes had her panicking. "Um, let's walk," she said quickly, pulling at her door handle.

He got out and came around to help her out of the car, standing close, too close, as she rose from her seat. He leaned forward. "Umm, you smell so good."

She pushed against his chest, forcing him to step back. "Thank you." She headed quickly down toward the shore. Anything to give her some distance from his overbearing presence.

Apparently he wasn't deterred. Marcus came up behind her, ran his hands down her arms. Lisa was beginning to realize she may be in jeopardy. He wanted to get all lovey-dovey and she had no desire to do so. She'd hightailed it out of the car to escape being pawed at, but she realized now that she was even more vulnerable here in a semi-wilderness, on rough ground, on his estate. He pulled her back against him, kissed her neck. "Lisa, you do something to me."

She stepped away. "I think you're the one doing something to me," she said jokingly, trying to play it off.

Moving up close again, he grabbed her and turned her around to face him, holding her arms tightly.

"Marcus, you're hurting my arm. It's not completely healed yet."

"Oh, sorry." He loosened his grip. "Maybe this is better." His arm slipped around her waist, pulling her against him.

She braced her hands against his chest. "Marcus, I don't think this is very wise."

"Oh, it's so wise, Lisa. You see, I have to tell you something."

"Then tell me, but stop pawing at me."

He smiled, but didn't release her. "You don't understand. From the first moment I saw you, I knew you were the one for me."

"What?"

"It's a surprise, I know. It surprised me too. I had no idea that from

the moment I met you my heart would no longer belong to me. You're the one, Lisa, the one I've been looking for all my life."

"Marcus, maybe you've had a little too much..."

He kissed her, holding her tight against her struggles.

"M,m– Marcus," she said as she struggled to pull away. "Get hold of..." He kissed her again.

She stomped on his toe.

"Ow." He backed up. "What the hell?"

She gasped, trying to catch her breath. "Just back off."

He grinned at her. "You're a little hellcat, but that's okay because I like that. You see? Everything about you is perfect. Think about it Lisa. It's not just a coincidence that you came to live here, right next door to me. It was meant to be. Listen, I know it sounds crazy, but we could fly to Vegas, get married. Honeymoon in Cancun, or Hawaii. I have plenty of money so you'll never want for anything."

He came forward. Lisa backed up.

"I don't need or want your money, Marcus. Have you lost your mind? I'm not gonna marry you. I barely know you."

His face turned red with anger. "You think you're too good for me? Is that it?"

"Give me a break. No, of course not, but if and when I marry it will be because I'm in love."

He calmed himself. "Well I happen to think that you do love me and just don't realize it yet."

"Seriously?"

"I'm quite serious. Why did you dress so provocatively tonight, if not to entice me to your charms? Why did you wear that perfume that just drives me nuts? Huh? When women do those things, it's a proclamation and I'm picking up your signals loud and clear."

"I'm not sending you any signals."

"Lisa, I think you've realized I can be very charming. Much more so than all the good ole boy rednecks around here. Come here, let me show you just how charming I can be."

"No, now just stop. I want to go home."

He came forward. "You don't really want that."

She backed up. "Yes, I do."

"Come here, Lisa, I'm gonna show you a really good time."

He lunged at her. She turned and ran but she was in heels and he caught up to her easily, grabbed her from behind and they tumbled to

the ground. He lay on top of her, pinning her down.

"Marcus, you get off of me, right now."

He seemed completely undeterred. "Lisa, you don't understand. I've fallen in love with you."

"That's ridicu..." she gasped as his hand moved to touch her body. "This has gone far enough," she cried, struggling to get out from under him. She grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled.

He only laughed. "Kind of like the cavemen, huh?" He retaliated, grabbing a long lock and winding it around his fist several times. He gave her head a little shake. "Gotcha now, don't I?"

He held her head still while he tried to kiss her again. She tried to bite him but that only seemed to stir him up even more. "Girl, you make me crazy. Come on, tell the truth, you want me, don't ya?"

"No," she said, futilely struggling against his strength. She stopped, stilled, trying to catch her breath. "Let me go, Marcus."

"No means no, huh, Lisa?" Letting go of her hair he grabbed the shoulder of her dress and pulled, ripping it.

"Stop this right now, Marcus! Let me go!"

He put his mouth to her shoulder bit down.

She cried out. "Let me go," she screamed, pummeling his back with her fists. When she felt him tugging at her dress, she discovered real fear. She tried to wiggle out from under him. Tried to buck him off. He mumbled something about liking that. She was completely vulnerable. "Marcus, please," she sobbed.

"I'm working on it, Lisa. Be patient."

"That's not what I meant, Marcus, and you know it. Please, stop this, right now!"

He had her pinned so completely. She stopped struggling. Her head fell back as she looked up at the stars through her tears. He was mumbling something about loving her. About finally finding the one. Tears spilled over her cheeks. Her arm throbbed, her head pounded, and then, her fingers touched a wonderful solid object. She lay very still as she stealthily maneuvered the large rock into her hand. When she was sure she had a good grip on it, she swung with all her might.

He only made a slight moan when the rock connected with his head. Then he was dead weight. With a grunt she rolled him off of her. She was terrified he'd come to before she could make it out of there. She dashed back to the car and grabbed her purse. Her hands shook so hard she could barely push the buttons. It took her only a second to

decide whom to call.

"Hello?"

"Chaz?" She'd tried to calm her voice but knew she sounded hysterical.

"Lisa, what's wrong?"

The tears came. "Can you come get me?"

"Where are you?"

"I don't know."

"Lisa, calm down, you have to tell me where you are."

"A lake."

"Wilson's lake?"

She sniffed. Tried to think. Got her bearings. "No, no, I'm at the Winstead's place."

"I'm on my way. Don't hang up. What happened? Are you okay?"

"He– he tried to— he tried to..."

"Okay, hon. I get it. I'm on my way."

"I hit him. I hit him with a rock. I think I knocked him out, but I don't know how long he'll stay out. Hurry, please. What if he wakes up! Chaz, please hurry. I think he's gonna wake up."

"I'm getting in my jeep now. It won't take long. I'm almost there. Are you near the car?"

She sniffed. "Yes."

"Turn on the lights so I can find you."

She ran around to the driver's side, reached in and turned them on, watching Marcus the entire time, hoping and praying he'd stay out for just a little bit longer.

"Lisa, answer me!"

"Huh? I'm sorry. I didn't hear you."

"I asked if you can see Marcus from where you are."

"Yes. Chaz, please hurry. I think he's moving."

"On my way, Lisa. Hold on. I'm just passing your house."

In only a few minutes that seemed more like hours, he pulled into the gate and raced toward the back of the Winstead's property.

"I can see you," she said.

He didn't answer. He was at her side within seconds. She threw herself into his arms.

"Okay, okay, now." He pulled her away to assess the damage. She was completely dressed. That was a relief of sorts. Her hair was a tangled mess, her dress was ripped from the shoulder.

"Where's Marcus?"

She motioned to a dark spot about twenty feet away. Chaz positioned the Jeep so the headlights shone on Marcus' body. He knelt beside him. "Good Lord, Lisa."

"What is it?"

"You knocked the heck out of him."

She came forward, her hand on her mouth. "Oh, no. I didn't really mean to hurt him bad. He's not– dead, is he?"

Chaz waited a moment to answer while he took his pulse. "Not yet, though I'll be happy to finish the job." He took out his phone, called his brother, gave him the rundown. Marcus moaned, opened his eyes. Chaz leaned close to him. "Stay down. I've called an ambulance. They'll fix you up and once you're back on your feet, if you ever come near her again, I'm gonna hurt you bad. Real bad."

Lisa moved closer. "Can you help him?"

"I've got paramedics coming," he said as he rose. Glancing at Lisa he realized she was trembling. He went to her, pulled her into his arms. "There now. Are you hurt?"

She sniffled, shook her head. "Not really. Maybe a little bruised. It was so weird, like, he sort of went crazy. Said he'd fallen in love with me. Said, I was the one he'd been waiting for. He grabbed me and kissed me before I could stop him. I tried to make him stop and when he wouldn't I tried to get away. I ran, but he chased me down and next thing I knew he was on top of me. He wouldn't let me up. I– I didn't mean to hurt him so badly."

"He deserved what he got." Holding her close, he let her ramble on. It wasn't long before he looked up to see two patrol cars, Tyson's and the Sheriff's, coming towards them with the ambulance just behind. And just behind them, Andrea was running down from the house, yelling and screaming. Well, he thought, here goes.

The paramedics pulled up and hopped out. "Lisa is okay for now. You'd better see to him," Chaz said, motioning toward Marcus.

Tyson had Lisa sit down in the Jeep. "You okay, hon?"

She nodded.

"What happened to Marcus?" Andrea screamed, throwing herself down by her brother's side. "Marcus, are you okay?" He moaned. "He's covered with blood." Andrea jumped up and ran at Chaz. "What did you do to him? What did you do?" She charged him, pounding his chest with her fists. "I'll kill you."

He held her away. "Stop it, Andrea. Marcus got what was coming to him. He tried to rape Lisa."

She gasped. Turned to Lisa. "That's a lie. You dirty whore. That's a lie and you know it."

"Settle down, Andrea," Sheriff McCauley said. "Everybody just settle down." He turned to Lisa. "Maybe you'd better tell me what happened."

She filled the Sheriff in on the events of the night, while Tyson and Chaz listened and Andrea threw her ten cents in every two seconds, calling Lisa a lying whore and demanding that she be arrested for assault.

When Lisa finished, the Sheriff stood, took off his hat, ran a hand through his hair, replaced the hat, and began issuing orders. "Tyson, go to the hospital with Marcus. Once they release him, take him in on attempted rape. Andrea, you get your spoiled butt in the house. I suggest you get hold of your uncle. Lisa, I'm gonna have to ask you to come to the hospital and submit to an exam. There's probably some bruising or marks that we can use for evidence. I know this is hard, but it will help in the long run."

Lisa nodded. "I'll take her," Chaz said.

"All right, then. Let's get a move on."

⌂⌂⌂

In the wee hours of the morning, they cuddled on the large, overstuffed sofa in the front room. Maddie had finally stopped stressing and worrying and serving goodies and gone to bed. Joe, convinced she was gonna be okay, left for his own home. Lisa's head lay on Chaz's chest and Dixie lay asleep on Lisa's lap. Her arm had a new bandage, her cheek a fresh bruise.

"So, Lisa, was it terribly bad? I mean, the exam?"

"Well, it wasn't fun, but they said it was a good thing I came in. They were able to document a lot of evidence. Scratches, bruises. They took pictures. Talk about embarrassing. They found more scratches and bruises on my back, and side and arm, *and* a perfect dental impression on my shoulder."

His grip tightened before he sighed and kissed the top of her head. "Do you want to talk about it?"

She shrugged, pretending nonchalance, because she did wanna talk, she needed to talk. "Ya know, I just don't understand what came over him. It's like he went crazy or something. The things he said were

so very illogical." She shook her head. "It was like Jekyll and Hyde. Weird because he's always been a perfect gentleman." She looked up at Chaz. "You're not gonna give me an 'I told ya so,' kind of speech, are you?"

He hugged her. "No. You've been through enough."

She relaxed against him. "One of the things that kept running through my mind was how much I wished you would drive up, though I knew no one was coming to save me. I tried so hard to fight. My injured arm was weak and he was so strong. My strength gave out and I finally gave up. I knew he was gonna succeed. I'd already begun to worry about what he would do once he was finished."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, would he come to his senses and realize he'd just raped me and then try to cover it up by killing me and hiding the body."

"Sweet Jesus," Chaz mumbled.

"I know. Scary, huh? I think it was the first time in my life I was truly terrified."

He held her close. After a few minutes he spoke again. "So, you said you gave up. Obviously, you didn't. What made you try again?"

"I don't know. He was so close to getting what he wanted, and, then, out of the blue, I found that rock." She shuddered. "I hit him as hard as I could, but even after I hit him, I was terrified, ya know, that he would get back up and be mad and take revenge."

"Well, he *was* mad in the hospital. Made a lot of stupid threats. You should have heard him once Tyson began to read him his rights."

Lisa smiled, but then shivered again. "I wish this whole thing would just go away."

"Listen, sweetheart, you may as well know, Marcus' uncle is a county magistrate. He'll be out by nine o'clock in the morning."

"Really? Well, that's just great."

"I'll stay nearby, Lisa. No one is gonna hurt you again."

She yawned. "I should be strong and tell you us women can take care of ourselves, but actually, I'm a little bit frightened. It's funny. I lived in LA for four years and was never accosted. I've been here about four weeks and I've been stabbed, almost raped, had my car stolen, oh, and don't forget about being attacked by killer cows."

"No, I don't think I could ever forget that."

She yawned again. "I'm so sleepy, I can't even muster enough energy to get up and go to bed."

He snuggled down farther into the soft cushions of the couch, bringing her with him. "Okay then, we'll stay right here."

She laid her head against his chest. "I feel safe now, here, with your arms around me. Thank you, Chaz," she mumbled. "For coming so quickly." Her eyes drifted closed.

⌂⌂⌂

Marcus ordered another shot. Stupid. He'd been stupid. It was like he'd been in a trance or something. He'd completely forgotten about his plan to develop a friendship, steer it into a courtship and marry the red-hot number. It would be the easiest way to get the land and he was pretty sure he could live with sleeping with her every night. Take it slow and easy he'd told himself. But then he'd just freaked out. But she'd smelled so good, looked so good. Surely she expected it. Sweat appeared on his upper lip at the thought.

And now, she actually intended to press charges. Attempted rape. Stupid. The real crime was what she did to him. She was a tease. Women like that deserve what they get. She was now a major complication. He frowned. Lisa Lewis hadn't been around for twenty-five years. All this time she's been a non-entity. So why now? Why did she have to show up now? He'd planned everything so carefully. Within the year Maddie would be dead and with no one to inherit her land it would revert back to the state and after that, thanks to his ties in the county, he'd be able to purchase it at a quarter of its value. But now Lisa is in the way. He's gonna have to deal with her and she is no push-over.

He frowned, trying to think clearly. Lisa presented a problem. One he'd have to remove. It really couldn't be helped. Maddie will get sick and kick off. Lisa would have to die in a carefully planned accident. He sighed. In an accident it would be over so quickly and he really would like to see her suffer a little before she dies, if just for the inconvenience she's caused him.

He threw his money down and staggered out to the parking lot. A hot, emerald green Jaguar pulled in next to his BMW. Marcus stopped and watched the owner get out. He'd seen this guy before. "Nice wheels," Marcus said.

"Yeah, thanks," the guy answered curtly, as he headed toward the motel's night office.

"You're Lisa's ex, aren't you?"

He stopped and turned abruptly. "Who are *you*?"

Marcus leaned nonchalantly against his car. "I'm one of her neighbors and I'm also the man she just had thrown in jail for attempted rape."

Glen came back and leaned against his own car. "Okay, you got my attention."

"I thought I would. So tell me, what are you doing in town?"

⌂⌂⌂

Jenny bent to clear the last round of glasses and set two more beers and two more shots on the table. Marcus grabbed her hand. "You're lookin' good tonight, Jenny girl."

"I'll drink to that," Glen said, sloshing his beer as he tried to clink glasses with Marcus.

She stepped back. "You fellas have had so much to drink my dog would look good to you tonight." Turning quickly, she walked away.

"So, back to what I was saying," Glen said, his speech slightly slurred. "She thinks she's gonna come here and make her life all rosy after she's ruined mine, she'd better think again."

"I knew you'd understand," Marcus said. "A man can't let some chick make him look bad."

"Absolutely not."

"I can't believe she pulled a gun on you, man. I bet you wanted to slam her around."

Glen nodded. "I hit her once. Felt great, but once is not enough."

"I understand." Marcus eyed his new buddy. His new very drunk buddy. "I almost had her."

"I've had her many times and I gotta give it to her, it's worth going to jail for." He looked Marcus over. "So, she got you with a rock, huh?"

"Eleven stitches."

"Man, you gonna let her get away with that?" Glen asked.

"Not hardly."

"Okay, so, whatcha got in mind? I mean, I wouldn't mind getting a piece of the action. I've been looking forward to, once more, for old times' sake, if ya know what I mean."

Marcus nodded his head. "I do know, and I can help you with that. We'll roofie her up."

"Roofie?"

"It's Rohypnol. You know? The date rape drug."

Glen sat up straighter. "Keep talking."

⌂⌂⌂

Proverbs 6:12-14

"A troublemaker and a villain, who goes about with a corrupt mouth, who winks maliciously with his eye, signals with his feet and motions with his fingers, who plots evil with deceit in his heart— he always stirs up conflict."

Chapter 12

Lisa entered the kitchen bright and early on a Monday morning to find Grams and Chaz chatting away about what Maddie's new kitchen is going to look like.

"Oh, hi," she said, smiling sweetly. She went to Maddie and kissed her cheek, then turned to Chaz. "You're here awfully early."

"Had to get an early start. The ranch is keeping me busy. I promised Miss Maddie I'd till up some weeds and put down some new soaker hoses for her garden."

Lisa went to the stove and piled scrambled eggs, ham, and a biscuit onto a plate. "Grams, I'm gonna have to introduce you to some lighter breakfast fare soon, or I'm gonna be as big as a cow."

"Okay then, I'll start the research on that right away," Maddie said. "Our guests will want to have good healthy options to a regular country breakfast."

Lisa laughed. "Aww Grams, you really have embraced our project, haven't you?"

"Absolutely. I'm so happy I feel like the cat that got the cream."

"I'm happy that you're happy, Grams. Speaking of cats, have you seen Dixie?"

"Not this morning."

"Hmm, something must have caught her attention."

"She probably went out the pet door chasing a rabbit twice her size," Maddie said with a chuckle.

Lisa sat next to Chaz, placing her hand on his arm. "You're awfully quiet this morning."

"Hm? Oh, I was just listening to the two of you chatter. I believe you're starting to pick up a southern accent."

"I am not," Lisa said indignantly.

"See? Did you hear that? You definitely made two syllables out of 'am'."

Lisa grinned. "Did I? Well, you all sound so cute maybe I'm trying to talk southern."

"You all?" Chaz laughed. "It's y'all. You're gonna need to work

on that one."

Lisa made a face. "How about y'all bein' quiet and let me eat my breakfast in peace."

Grams giggled as she rose and cleared her dishes. Then out of the blue she came around and kissed Chaz and Lisa both on the cheek.

"What was that for?" Chaz asked.

"I suppose it's just because I'm feeling so happy and because I'm so glad you came home, Lisa. I'm so very glad that..." She stopped and sniffed. "Oh, now look at me, crying like a baby."

"Oh, Grams," Lisa cried, standing quickly and wrapping her arms around the tiny woman. "Please don't cry."

"It's okay, dear," Maddie said, wiping at her eyes with a napkin. "They're just tears of joy."

Chaz cleared his throat. "Well, ladies, I've got work to do." Placing his dishes in the sink, he started toward the kitchen door. "Besides, Beebe's gettin' impatient out there."

"Well, if I haven't said it lately, thanks for all you do, Chaz," Maddie said.

He hugged her. "It's my pleasure. I suppose things are about to get pretty hectic around here, what with all the remodeling and building, the pool and patio going in." He winked at Maddie. "I sure hope Lisa really does know what she's doing."

"I most certainly do," Lisa answered haughtily. "Everything is falling right into place. The loans will be paid off within the first three years. The advertising is the key and I'm an expert at that."

"Maddie tells me you intend to charge over five hundred dollars per night. Don't you think that's a little steep for these parts?"

"First, it's a package. It includes cooking lessons from a professional chef among other things. And the clients won't be coming from 'these parts' as you put it. They'll come in from New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston. They'll come to Pine Forest for the peace and the novelty of country living; a getaway from the rat race, but they'll still have all the amenities. You know, pool, sauna, fitness room, fine dining, entertainment and of course, ropin' and ridin' thanks to you and your dad."

"Well, I don't know that we'd let anyone rope, but we have some gentle horses that can be ridden and we'll let them ride with us, check out the workings of a small family ranch. Speakin' of riding, you need to learn yourself."

"Troy took me out a few times. I think I could get the hang of it."

"You're gonna have to prove that to me," he challenged.

"You're on. Oh, Chaz, before you leave, let me give you the papers I told your dad I'd have drawn up. The releases and such our clients will sign. I left them in the truck. I'll be right back."

He watched her go. It was difficult to have a casual conversation with her when all he could think about was the time they'd spent together as a couple and how much he wanted a repeat. Man, how he'd like to..." Lisa's shrill scream ended his musings. He ran toward the front door.

"No, no, no." She was sprawled on the porch, wailing and crying.

Chaz made his way to her side and then saw it. "Oh, Lord Jesus," he prayed. He turned to Maddie who'd been right behind him. "Maddie, get her inside."

Maddie somehow convinced Lisa to follow her into the house. Chaz pulled his knife and cut the string that suspended Dixie's bloody, lifeless body above the porch steps. His vision blurred for just a split second, but he got himself under control.

"I'm gonna get you," Chaz promised.

⌂⌂⌂

"How's she doin'?" Chaz asked Maddie later that afternoon as he carried a duffel bag and a backpack into the house.

"She hasn't spoken all day. She's up in her room, just staring out the window. I can't get her to eat or drink."

"I'll go up and see if I can talk to her. Which room do you want *me* to take?"

"Oh, Chaz, are you really sure you want to stay here?"

"Yes, ma'am. It's only until I feel you're safe. I won't be able to sleep at night worried about my two favorite girls over here all alone in this big house."

"Well, I'm grateful to you. You're a good boy, Chaz. Always have been. Um, so, I think you should take the yellow room right across from Lisa's room. That way you can keep an eye on her."

He nodded, started up the steps. "I'll go speak to her now. I'll let you know how it goes."

He deposited his bags in the yellow room and knocked softly on Lisa's door.

She didn't answer, so he turned the knob and opened the door. She stood by the window, staring out over the backyard.

"Lisa, how ya feeling, hon?"

Chaz waited a few moments for her to speak and when she didn't he moved forward. His hands came to rest on her shoulders. "Sweetheart, I know this hurts, but you have to pull out of it."

At the sound of her sniffle he looked around for a box of tissues and went to retrieve one. When he stood by her once again, he gently turned her around to face him and wiped her tears.

She sniffed. "How? How could anyone hurt a tiny, defenseless, little creature like that?"

"He's a sicko, Lisa, but we will catch him. Look, I want you to go wash your face and come downstairs and have something to eat."

She shook her head. "I don't want to do anything. I keep thinking about that sweet kitten's little body hanging there, about what she must have gone through."

He shook his head. "She didn't suffer, Lisa. It was a quick death. He cut her throat. He knew he had to work fast in order to not get caught in broad daylight."

"Cut her throat? Ugh!" She put her hands to her head as if the motion could blot out the image. "Just go, leave me alone."

"Well, that's not gonna happen."

"Chaz, I don't want to argue with you."

"Then don't."

The tears started again.

"Lisa, this is a hard thing. Death is a hard reality to grasp, but you have to keep living. Life goes on."

"It feels like I don't want to go on."

"I know." He had to force himself to breathe through the sudden pain. "I know. But you have to make yourself." He lifted her chin. "Time will make the pain ease. It never goes away completely, but it will take the major edge off. You just have to give it time. And until that happens you have to keep living. You have to eat and sleep and do your work."

"With all due respect, it's not your pet that was brutally murdered." She turned to face him. "What if you found Beebe with her throat slit?"

His jaw clenched but he spoke softly. "I know more about this than you can imagine."

"Well then tell me about it, please, because I'm desperately trying to understand."

Chaz stepped back, running a hand through his hair, his heart beating so loud he could barely hear what Lisa was saying. It was time. He grabbed her hand. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

He pulled her downstairs. "Maddie, I'm taking Lisa for a drive."

"Good. That will be nice."

She resisted going out on the porch but he tugged her and she had to follow or be dragged. He'd scrubbed the blood from the steps but there was definitely a stain, so he moved her past it quickly.

Once in the jeep he strapped her in and gunned the engine. They didn't speak. He drove toward his parents' house then veered off on a dirt road that appeared to disappear into the woods. He drove another half a mile before their destination came into view.

Lisa gasped. "This is your house?"

"Yes."

"It's beautiful."

"Thanks," he said softly looking up at the structure with pride. "I built it myself."

"Oh, Chaz, you built it yourself? It's amazing."

"Well, I had some help. Josh, and Evan and even Troy. My dad and Tyson helped too. They'd come over on the weekends or at night and help me work on whatever was my latest project."

"I'm impressed." She lifted her head to gaze at the architecture. It was a log cabin, but cabin hardly described the building. It appeared to have at least two stories, maybe three. It had obviously been built to blend with, and even be camouflaged by, the surrounding forest. He took her by the elbow and led her up the steps of a giant porch. The roof of the porch formed the floor of a balcony above.

He opened the door and led her in. The log walls were charming, but they were the only thing that was charming because there was no furniture except for a small table in the kitchen. The rest of the home appeared to be empty. He led her through the house toward a circular staircase. Once upstairs he pulled her down a hall to the main bedroom and opened the door.

A rumpled king-size bed and cluttered dresser were the only pieces of furniture here. A navy blue comforter lay half on, half off the bed. Boots lay on the floor along with a pair of jeans. A towel hung over the doorknob of a door that apparently led to the bathroom. He made no

apologies for the mess. Instead, sat her on the end of the bed and motioned for her to stay. She watched as he went to a walk-in closet and disappeared.

A few minutes later he reappeared with a cardboard box and set it down on the floor beside the bed. Standing in front of her he drew a deep breath. "I have something to tell you."

"Okay."

"It's a story really."

"Okay, I'm listening."

He ran a hand through his blond hair and began to pace. "Three years ago, I was a paramedic working for the Pine County Fire Department. I was on my fourth day of a four days on, four days off work schedule. I can't tell you how much I was looking forward to those days off."

He stopped, checking to make sure he had her attention before he went on and swallowing down the lump in his throat at the same time. "It was eight o'clock at night when we got buzzed. There was an accident up on Highway 72. A hit and run. A few witnesses said it was a white pickup and it looked as if the person driving it was drunk. They said the car had flipped several times, hit a tree. I arrived on scene and moved quickly toward the car. It didn't register in my mind that the car looked vaguely familiar to me. It was upside down and really crushed beyond recognition. On scene there was a woman, a young woman..." He had to stop a moment.

"Chaz," Lisa said gently. "Please, come sit down." She patted the bed beside her.

He shook his head. "No, I have to get this out." He drew a deep breath and went on. "She was covered in blood. She'd been thrown from the car. Half of her head had been completely crushed. Her eyes were still open, but she was dead. There was no life there. And then, inside the car, still strapped in her car seat, was a little girl. A sweet blond haired, brown-eyed little girl hanging upside down."

His eyes filled with tears but he went on. "The car must have flipped several times. The little girl's neck was broken. Her little body was mangled and bloody. It just couldn't take the trauma." He stopped because his throat became clogged.

"It must have been awful for you, Chaz. I'm so sorry. Here I was making a fuss about a kitten. The things you must have seen in that job." She shook her head.

"Let me finish, Lisa, because what I haven't told you yet, is that the woman— the woman, she was my wife— and the little girl— she was my daughter."

Lisa's gasp made him stop again. Her hand flew to cover her mouth. "Oh, no. Oh, Chaz no." She began to cry softly, yet somehow she knew to not go to him, not crowd him, to let him continue to talk.

He blinked and the tears coursed down his cheeks. "I went totally berserk. I really don't remember everything that happened after that. They had to pull me away. Shot me up with something. Over the next few days and weeks I fell apart. I barely remember the funeral. It was all a big fog, as if I were seeing everything from very far away and I couldn't communicate with anyone around me."

The tears ran freely now. "My family though– my family refused to let me go. They kept at me, stood by me. My mom practically forced fed me. One day, my brother actually drug me into the shower. Just turned the water on and tossed me in with my clothes on."

He swiped a hand across his face and drew a deep breath. "It was a long way back for me. So, you see, Lisa, I really do know and understand how you feel. I really do know about forcing myself to get up in the morning, to get dressed, to put food into my mouth and chew it and swallow it and then do it again. And again. And I also know that it will get better. It will. The pain will fade.

"I even know that you can eventually be open to finding another love. I know that, because I have. For three years I thought my life was over and then you came into it and everything changed. Now– now, I'm glad I forced myself to live. I'm glad I'm still alive because I found you, Lisa. I found you and I fell in love with you."

She rose, moving to him, her tears falling as freely as his. "Chaz," she whispered as she put her arms around him. He took her face in his hands and she took his face in her hands and their mouths melded. They tasted the salt of each other's tears, inhaled the sweetness of each other's essence. They found comfort in each other's soul. He yielded his pain to her, turned it over to her for safe keeping and she gave herself to him, giving comfort in complete trust and understanding.

"I love you, Lisa," he whispered softly.

"I love you too, Chaz," she answered, for the first time, giving him the words he craved.

He opened his eyes and looked into hers.

"I do," she said quietly.

With a smile now, his head dipped to kiss her mouth. Softly, gently. But he panicked. Groaned, pushed away.

She grabbed him, her hands on either side of his face. "Stay with me," she said softly. "Right here with me, Chaz. Right where I want you. Right where you belong. I love you."

His vision blurred, his heart pounded and he cried.

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They'd sat on the bed talking, finally stretched out side by side until silently, they lay face to face, looking into each other's eyes, into each other's soul.

It was Lisa who finally spoke. "Why did you wait to tell me?"

It was several moments before he answered.

"I didn't want you to be with me out of pity, or compassion. I wanted to have a real, healthy relationship with you and not feel like a man stripped of, well..."

"Of what? Of your manhood?" she asked. "Of your pride?"

"Yeah, I guess both of those things."

"You, Chaz, are all man. Feeling grief for the loss of a loved one is natural, it's expected. I don't understand your line of thinking. Yes, of course I would feel compassion for your loss, but I wouldn't be with you because of that compassion."

He rolled to his back, sighed deeply. "It's more than that. I'm having— visions, flashbacks. That's the real problem."

"Understandable. To come upon the people you love, the people who mean the most to you in this world and find them like you did," she shook her head. "I'd say a few nightmares are in order."

"It's more than that. There are nightmares, yes, but sometimes I'm completely awake. I can't control it. It can happen when I'm talking to someone, or eating, or out riding fences, or..." He stopped, unsure if he should go further. He knew though, that if he and Lisa were to have any kind of relationship, she should know everything. "It can happen when I'm kissing you, or holding you, or if I were to make love with you."

Her eyes met his and realization struck. "And it happened that night at the lake?"

"Yes. One minute I'm kissing you, the next, I'm kissing a corpse. It might be easier to deal with if sometimes I simply saw her face, but it's always as I saw her that night. Bloody. Lifeless."

She moved to lay her head on his chest.

"That night at the lake I realized that I wasn't ready yet for a

relationship with you, or with anybody. That I may never be ready. After that, I was terrified of being near you, because being near you brings strong feelings and those strong feelings could trigger another flashback. That fear made me impotent in a way. How could I think you'd want to be involved with an impotent man?"

"But..."

"Wait, let me finish. I tried to pretend that you didn't matter. That you'd be better off without me, but I couldn't hide what I felt for you. You're the first. The only one since the accident that's been able to get through to me. You make me feel life again. You make me feel everything again. You've been in my life for one month and I can't imagine ever letting you go. But I'm still afraid, Lisa. I'm afraid I'm not a whole man who can give you what you need. I never know when I'll have one of my episodes. How can I subject you to that?"

"You let me decide what I want to be subjected to, okay? I'm in love with you, Chaz. Like you said, it's only been a month, and I can't imagine life without you. Crazy, I know. Together though, I'm sure we can work through any obstacles."

"It's not that easy."

"I didn't say it would be easy, but I'm not afraid of hard work. And you don't strike me as the type who is easily defeated. We'll do whatever we have to do to get through it. We'll make things work."

"Don't you see, Lisa? I don't want me to be your project, I don't want me to be someone you're helping to overcome a problem. *That* is what robs me of my manhood."

"But I don't see you that way, Chaz. When I look at you I see a man who takes on the weight of the world. Who keeps his head held high even though his heart is breaking. Who takes care of those he loves, be it his parents, his sisters, his friends, or a little old lady who lives down the road. A man who takes care of me, and protects me. Someone I depend on, admire and respect. Someone I turn to first when something bad happens. And someone who, when he kisses me, turns my knees to jelly and makes my heart swell with love. You make me feel like a real woman. You make me want to be a good person, to be someone who is worthy of you."

"Oh, Lisa, Lisa, Lisa, what did I do to deserve the love of a woman like you? I want you to know something, I have never, not ever since the accident, been able to speak to anyone about it, until you. I mean, yes, people mention it to me, offer me support and advice, but I always

push them away, walk away, end the conversation. You're the only one I've ever initiated a conversation with about Cari."

"Cari. Is that her name?"

"Yes."

"What's your daughter's name?"

"Julie. Dear God, what a beautiful child she was. I thanked God for her every single day. She was so precocious and so..." His voice choked with emotion.

Lisa reached up and stroked his face. "Do you have any pictures? Or would that be too much to handle right now?"

He rose. "No, I'd like you to see them. I got the box out earlier to show you. That's why I brought you here to tell you." He grabbed the box still sitting on the floor beside the bed.

Lisa rose up to sit beside Chaz. Reverently he opened the box and pulled out remnants of a previous life. He showed her pictures of the wedding, of Julie's birth, of family gatherings. Papers covered with crayon scribbles and then an adult's handwriting that said, "To Daddy, love, Julie."

They looked over everything in the box, talking and weeping together. Lisa saw pictures of how Chaz's house used to look and he explained that he'd gotten rid of everything that reminded him of the life he'd shared with his wife. He told her funny stories of the antics of a two-year-old. He told her of the typical doting grandparents and aunts and uncles and how difficult it was for him to face their pain as well as his own.

Lisa listened, wept, stroked, sustained, supported, bolstered and reinforced as Chaz emptied his soul to her.

It was much later, as they tucked the box back into the closet, that Lisa asked what she felt moved to ask.

"You said, you thanked God for little Julie every day. I haven't noticed you going to church on Sundays."

"I haven't been back to church since the accident. I was bitter. I couldn't understand how God could let that happen to two completely innocent people."

Lisa nodded. "I get where you're coming from."

"How about you? Have you been going to church with Maddie?"

Lisa shook her head. "I've never been to church. My mother said there is no God, and I guess I believed her. But knowing what I know now, I'm inclined to believe the opposite of anything my mother stood

for. Maybe I'll look into the idea of a higher being. Do you mind if I ask what Cari believed?"

Chaz sighed heavily, tears welled in his eyes once again. "Cari was a believer. She was the strongest person I knew. Her faith was unshakeable. She and I both claimed to be saved through the blood of Jesus, but she– she was the one who truly believed that Jesus was real. Really real. 'He exists,' she used to say. She said, 'He's not some airy fairy entity that someone made up. He exists. He was resurrected into a physical perfected body and therefore He takes up space. He is real.' I'd ask her how she can be so sure, and she'd say, 'Just ask Him to tell you and listen patiently. He'll let you know.' That's what she said, over and over."

"And did you ever do that?" Lisa asked.

A tear ran down his cheek as he shook his head. "I never did. There never seemed to be enough time. Of course, that was just an excuse. An excuse to not humble myself, to not get down on my knees, to not admit I needed God in my life. If only, if only she hadn't died before I did what she asked me to do. It was really important to her and I didn't take the time."

Lisa took his hand. "Well, you could do it now. I mean, really, Chaz, we could do it together. You and me."

He looked up, peered into her eyes, and knew it was meant to be, he and Lisa, the beating of two hearts, in synchrony.

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"Well, there you two are," Maddie said as Chaz and Lisa came through the door. "I was beginning to get worried."

"I'm sorry Grams," Lisa said. "I didn't realize how long we've been gone."

"Oh, that's okay. I just hope you're feeling better."

Lisa smiled at Chaz. "I am. Much better."

"Oh, well, good," she said looking back and forth between the two. "I was just about to put dinner away. Have you eaten?"

"No," they answered in unison.

"Could I interest you in some beef tips sautéed with onions and peppers over pasta in a light butter sauce, tomato and feta cheese salad and strawberry mousse?"

"Wow! And I thought things couldn't get any better," Chaz said with a grin.

Maddie ushered them into the dining room where she'd set the

table with candles and her fine china and silver.

"Grams, this is absolutely lovely. Is there a special occasion I don't know about?"

Maddie shrugged. "It's been a hard day for you, for all of us, and sometimes a good relaxing meal in a pleasant setting can help. Besides, I'm practicing some recipes for the inn."

Lisa hugged her. "Thank you, Grams, but, there's only two place settings. Aren't you eating?"

"Oh goodness, I ate almost an hour ago. Go on now, sit down and let me serve you."

"Absolutely not," Lisa said.

"Don't you argue with me young lady. You live in my house, you do what I say."

Lisa's jaw dropped.

Maddie laughed. "I've always wanted to say that. Maybe if I had when Louise was young things would've turned out differently."

"Oh, Grams," Lisa said softly.

"Sit. No arguments."

Chaz held a chair for Lisa. "I'd do what she says if I were you."

"I've always said you were a smart little boy," Maddie said with a smile. She turned to Lisa. "Now I'll go get dinner and you and Chaz can talk or whatever."

Chaz grinned. "Whatever, sounds good."

Maddie stopped at the entrance to the dining room. "Oh, and by the way, about what I said. It's *our* home, *not* mine."

Astonished, Lisa opened her mouth to speak but Maddie left much too quickly.

Chaz took Lisa's hand as they waited to be served. He brought it to his lips and kissed it. "I feel light. Like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders."

She smiled at him. "Me too. It's like, there's been this pain, you know, the wondering why you didn't want me anymore. Suddenly, the pain is gone and I feel like I could fly. I actually feel kind of happy. You know, I don't think I've ever said that, not ever before in my entire life."

"Well now, that's pretty darn sad, Lisa. Hopefully, somehow, I can make you happy."

"You have, Chaz. Today, you took care of me, you honored me by sharing your innermost pain with me. And we, well, we connected on

a level I've never connected before with anyone."

"And there's a lot more happiness out there to be had," he said.

"Like what?"

"Well, for example, this new project you're working on. I have a feeling that it's gonna make you very happy."

"It is. It already does. I get excited about all the plans and about making Grams happy and that gives me happiness. I mean, it's not just the finished product that will make me happy. It's the getting there, but up till now, there's been a shadow hanging over everything. After today, that shadow is gone."

"Not exactly gone. I mean, there is still someone out there trying to get rid of you, threatening to hurt you and those you love."

"And those I love?"

"Yeah, uh, I was gonna tell you. There was a note, on the bottom step, under a rock."

Lisa's throat closed. "And?"

"It said the cat was just the beginning. If you don't leave, everything and everyone you love is in danger."

"Oh no. No, no, no." She stood, walked toward the window. "What am I gonna do?"

"Do you even have to ask?"

"Yes, if my being here is putting Grams in danger. And you. And Joe and Shirley and Megan, oh, please, God, what do I do?"

"Lisa, come sit down."

She sat, her mind in a whirl.

"Do you trust me?" Chaz asked.

"I do, yes."

"Then listen to me. Giving in to threats is never the right thing to do. You cannot give them the power they seek. Someone is threatening to hurt you or those you love if you don't leave. Think about what that means. If you give in and leave Pine Forest, what stops them from hurting those you love anyway? Whatever they're after, they think they can accomplish it with you gone. Why? What are you keeping from happening for this person? Or maybe even, who does your presence protect? He wants you out of the way. He's evil. With you gone, who knows what he'll do or who he'll hurt."

"Then what can I do to protect them?"

He smiled at her. "That's admirable. I think you being here is protection of sorts. And I took the note to Tyson. He's contacted Joe.

I spoke with my family. We're all ready for the fight. Wasn't it you a week or so ago who said 'no one is gonna send you away from the home you'd just found'?"

"Yes, I did say that, but that was when I thought I was the only one in danger."

"Who's in danger?" Maddie asked as she carried a tray in and set it on the edge of the table.

"I just told her about the note."

"Oh, pish. No one is gonna force me to live in fear. I guarantee that they've got another thing coming if they try anything around here. Oh, yessir, we're ready now."

Lisa smiled at her. "But Grams..."

"But Grams nothing. Buck up, girl. We're about to have a war."

Chaz raised his eyebrows at Lisa. "That's the strength of home grown people. That's your legacy, Lisa. So, what do you say now?"

Lisa shrugged. "I guess I say, bring on the main course."

Maddie started toward the door. "It's on its way."

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2 Thessalonians 3:2-3

"And pray that we may be delivered from wicked and evil people, for not everyone has faith. But the Lord is faithful, and he will strengthen you and protect you from the evil one."

Chapter 13

Lisa pulled up outside a lovely home situated just outside the town of Pine Forest. The white house with dark green door and shutters, flower boxes, and a huge magnolia tree in the yard, was just as Lisa would picture an older southern home, quaint, neat and homey. Maddie opened the passenger side door of Lisa's pickup and slid to the ground.

"Are you sure you don't want to come in?" Maddie asked Lisa. "The ladies would love to hear firsthand all about our plans."

"I really can't today. Jodi and John will be here in two days and I have so much to do to get things ready for them. Tell the ladies I'll call a meeting with them so they can add their ideas to the pot. Tell them we'll do it real soon."

"They'll love that, but asking for their ideas– I can just see the trouble brewing." Maddie laughed with glee.

"Pick you up at four?"

"That would be great. Don't work too hard. Bye now." Maddie started up the walk but came back as Lisa was backing out.

Lisa rolled down her window. "Did you forget something?"

"Yep. I forgot to say, I love you, child."

"Oh, Grams," Lisa said softly, her eyes filling with tears. "I love you too."

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Lisa glanced at the clock. She'd been working her butt off for three hours and had two more to go before she had to pick up Grams. Chaz was hard at work on the ranch. There had been a "prison break" by the killer cows and fences had to be repaired, along with the multitude of day-to-day chores that "weren't gonna do themselves," as Chaz put it. Lisa smiled at the thought of him. Wasn't it lovely to have him conveniently staying across the hall.

She smiled at the room she'd prepared for her friends. She'd chosen the blue room at the far end of the hall. It was closest to the second bathroom. It had now been scrubbed from top to bottom, had brand-new sheets on the bed and a lovely quilt that Grams and her ladies had made together some years ago. There was a new computer

desk and a computer which Chaz had so magnanimously helped to get set up the previous week. They were so far out in the country, Lisa had to arrange for satellite internet. It was imperative that Jodi be able to do her thing and she needed the internet to do it.

Once Jodi arrived, Lisa would give her a few days to rest and settle and then she intended to turn much of the details over to her and John. Lisa laid the design proposals that had been submitted on the computer desk along with an agenda, straightened some notepads, gave the desk a pat and headed downstairs, intending to start on the front room. It would be the first thing Jodi would see and first impressions were important.

She'd just started to move the couch to a more feng shui position when she heard a knock on the back door. Chaz! Pleased that he would take time out of his busy day to come see her, she ran to the door but no one was there. Smiling, she walked down the porch steps out into the backyard. "Okay, Chaz, where are you?" she sang. The footsteps came from her right side and she turned. She could feel the blood drain from her face.

"Marcus," she said in a breathy voice. She knew she sounded afraid, which actually, she was. She forced herself to stay calm. "What are you doing here? You're not supposed to come within two hundred feet of the house."

He stepped forward, causing her to back away. Lisa looked left, hoping somehow miraculously, Chaz would come walking around the side of the house.

Marcus smiled at her and pulled a bouquet of flowers from behind his back. "I know I'm not supposed to be here, Lisa, but I just wanted to apologize."

"You expect me to accept your apology for what you did?"

"Accept it? Yes. Forgive me? I'll understand if you don't. I only wanted to let you know how sorry I am. I don't know what came over me. I wasn't myself. It's like I was possessed or something. You are such a beautiful, sexy woman, Lisa. I just went crazy. So, what do you say? Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?" He approached her, the flowers held out away from his body.

She stepped back. He stopped.

"Okay, okay. Don't be so skittish. I'll just put them down right here on the step."

She moved away quickly as he passed her. He set the bouquet on

the lowest step and backed out into the yard. "There now. I'm leaving. I just wanted to make peace."

The back screen door slammed shut as Chaz stepped out onto the porch and glared down at Marcus.

"Chaz, now don't go gettin' all crazy," Marcus said. "I just came by to apologize."

Chaz came down the steps and walked straight up to Marcus. "I suppose I want to apologize too."

"For what?"

"For this." He swung hard, and fast, his fist connecting with Marcus' jaw. Marcus dropped to the ground, groaning.

Lisa gasped but didn't interfere.

Marcus stood, nodded his head at Chaz. "I deserved that."

"No, you deserve much more than that." Chaz's fist rammed into the other man's stomach and as Marcus doubled over Chaz caught him in an uppercut. Marcus went down again.

"Chaz," Lisa said softly. "Please, no more violence."

Marcus struggled to his feet, blood pouring from his lip. Chaz started forward but Marcus backed up quickly. "I'm leaving, I'm leaving." He looked past Chaz to Lisa. "As I said, I'm sorry."

Marcus turned and left on foot toward the side yard. Chaz watched as he cleared the fence and mounted a sleek black thoroughbred. Grabbing Lisa's hand he pulled her to him.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. He didn't do anything. He was apologizing. Brought me flowers."

"So I see." He brushed his hand over her face. "I'm just glad I came back to the house."

"Why did you come? I mean, I thought you were gonna be tied up all day."

He smiled. "Well, I have a lot more to do, but my stomach wouldn't let me skip lunch."

"So you come home, beat up your neighbor, and casually talk about eating some lunch?"

He raised his eyebrows at her comically.

"Let's get you some lunch," she laughed. "I have to pick Grams up at four."

"Then we'd better hurry."

He scooped her up and made his way inside the house and placed

her down on the kitchen island.

Lisa sat there watching him move about the kitchen, grabbing bread from the cabinet and cold cuts from the fridge. She rubbed her hands over the island, remembering the day Glen stole her car and Chaz doctored her head. He glanced over at her, stopped doing what he was doing and came to her.

Placing his hands on her knees, he bent forward and gently kissed her lips. When he finally pulled away she could barely breathe because her heart was beating so fast. "If there was more time I swear I'd ask you to go upstairs with me right now and make love to me."

Chaz closed his eyes briefly, pushing down the need to do just that. It wasn't just the fear of having an episode keeping him from acting on the impulse. It was the talk they'd had about God. They hadn't prayed together yet. Lisa hadn't pushed it. But he wanted to feel more worthy before he prayed with her, and part of that worthiness would be to turn away from promiscuity. He well remembered all the Sunday School lessons and Wednesday night classes about staying morally clean. Sex was reserved for marriage. Not that he'd ever taken that seriously. He found now, a small voice inside him, whispering to him to honor Lisa by doing right with her. Maybe, Jesus was already talking to him.

"Hello?"

He snapped out of his reverie.

"Chaz, are you okay?"

He cleared his throat. "Yep, I'm good. And as much as I'd like to do exactly what you said, I'd rather honor you in a different way."

"Honor me?"

He nodded. "Will you pray with me?"

"Right now?"

He shrugged. "We talked about it, but we haven't done it."

"I know. I didn't want to pressure you. I figured you'd let me know when you're ready."

"Well," Chaz said softly. "I think I'm ready."

"Uh, well, okay." She frowned. "I've uh, I've never prayed before. I don't really know how."

"I remember. It's really just talking, like having a conversation. Just sayin' what's in your heart."

"Oh, okay," Lisa said softly.

Chaz took her hands in his. Closed his eyes.

"Hey, God." He drew a deep breath, blew it out. "Hey, God, dear

Father God, it's uh, it's been a long time. Sorry. I was, uh, mad at you. But I'm not mad anymore. I actually want to tell you how thankful I am that you brought Lisa here back to see her grandma. She's really something, and she's helped me a lot. But I guess you already know that. I, uh, I'm not sure why you had to take my wife and daughter. I guess they're with you now, wherever that is. Heaven I guess. Cari always said that heaven is a real place, not just like floating up in the clouds. Anyway, I imagine they are there with you, so tell them I said hello. Now, the reason Lisa and I are talking to you today is because we want to know that you're real. I mean, I feel like you brought Lisa to me, and I think she feels like that too."

"I do," Lisa whispered.

He squeezed her hands. "So, thanks for that. We need your help, if you don't mind. There's someone trying to hurt Lisa and her family, so we ask you to protect her, protect them, and help us catch this son-of-a, oh, yeah, sorry. You know what I mean. Whatever you are willing to do to help us in this situation, we'll gladly accept it. So, anyway, we want to get to know you. Cari said if I prayed and asked if you were real that you would let me know. So, I'm askin', we're askin'. Um, in Jesus' name we pray, Amen."

He opened his eyes, looked into Lisa's.

"Amen," she said resolutely.

He smiled, nodded, squeezed her hands. "What do you think?"

"I think that was beautiful. I don't know why, but I feel like crying and jumping for joy at the same time. How do you feel?"

"I feel kind of peaceful. Calm." He chuckled. "Hungry."

Lisa giggled. "Go finish making your lunch. But I hope we can do this again, soon."

"You mean pray?" Chaz asked.

She nodded, smiling sweetly.

"Lisa, you are something else."

She shrugged. "It's just that, well, I like this feeling. It's almost like, like, I felt Him, like, smiling at us."

Chaz nodded. "I think maybe Cari was right."

"I think so too," Lisa said softly.

He gazed into Lisa's eyes. His smile faded. "Cari?"

Lisa jumped down off the island quickly, grabbed his hands. "Chaz, it's me. It's Lisa."

"Please, Jesus, no, don't do this." His hands covered his eyes.

"Stop it. Stop."

She wouldn't let him push her away. Instead, she took his face in her hands like she'd done before. "It's okay. It's okay," she crooned.

When his breathing returned to normal she loosened her grip. "Chaz, what are you thinking?"

He sat down at the table, his head in his hands.

"Chaz, please don't shut me out. Tell me what you saw. Let's talk about it. Please. Chaz, please. Tell me what you saw. It will help to talk about it."

Defeated, he slowly looked up. "This is what I was talking about. Why I tried to make you give up on me. Do you think I want you to be my therapist? How can I make love to you knowing I could have a flashback at any time. I thought it was over. I know I've said that before. But I thought, now that I've shared my feelings with you it will be different. You know? I thought it would be different." He shook his head. "It destroys me to appear so weak."

Lisa shook her head. "Running away from the problem is what would be weak, Chaz. Confronting it is strong."

"That's what I thought. So I confronted it. I shared it with the woman I love. Now look what's happening. I've lost my dignity." He shook his head. "I thought I had it beat."

"You did. And you may have to do it again. And again. Until the problem fades away. It may take some time, Chaz. Can't you please grant yourself some time?"

He sighed, ran a hand through his hair. "Yes. I have no other choice, do I? Unless I learn to live without you and I don't want to do that. So, I won't run away. I will work through the episodes and I will give it time. But God, I hate this." He looked heavenward. "Did you hear me? I hate this."

"See," she said softly. "You really are the strongest man I know. Any other man would let his ego get all involved and would tell me to get lost."

He gave in to a small smile. "Well now, any other man doesn't have a vision of you to motivate him."

She sat in the chair next to him, turned it to face him, took his hand. "Tell me what you saw."

He shook his head. "One minute it was you, the next it was Cari. She was smiling. Then laughing and then her head started to disintegrate." He swallowed hard.

She nodded. "You know how you want me to stay here and not let whoever force me to leave? You said our families will pull together and take care of our own. Well, you and me, we'll pull together too. We can't let anything come between us because I think what we have is worth fighting for."

He leaned over and kissed her softly. "I think so too. Lisa, I'm sorry for..."

"Don't you dare apologize. If you think I need an apology then you think very little of me."

He smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

She stood. "I really do need to go pick up Maddie soon."

He didn't argue. He finished making his sandwich, downed it with a glass of sweet tea and headed back out to finish his day.

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Lisa was able to finish the front room while Maddie cooked. She was tired and relieved when Maddie called her into dinner.

"Lord, it smells good," she said as she entered the kitchen, but stopped short. "Oh. You found the flowers."

"It's the strangest thing, they were on the back steps. Do you know where they came from?"

"Marcus brought them."

"Marcus? He came here?"

"Um hm. He came to apologize. Said he lost his mind or something like that."

"Oh, dear. What did you do?"

"I told him he wasn't supposed to be here."

"Did you forgive him?"

"Not really. I didn't have time to talk to him before Chaz came home and beat him up."

"Oh dear. How bad was it?"

"Pretty bad for Marcus. Not bad at all for Chaz. I was glad Chaz came home when he did, because I have to admit, Grams, I was a little bit afraid of Marcus."

"Of course you were, dear."

Lisa eyed her grandmother. "Grams, do you think I should've forgiven him?"

Maddie shrugged her shoulders as she carried a small pot roast surrounded by potatoes, carrots and onions to the table. "I'm very mad at him for hurting you. I'd like to take a belt to him, but I know we're

supposed to forgive, turn the other cheek and all that stuff. 'Vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord.' Even with everything he's done, my heart still goes out to him and his sister."

"You, Grams, are a saint."

"Not hardly, dear." She retrieved a basket of rolls and a tray of homemade butter. "So, Chaz isn't coming home tonight?"

"No. He and Tyson are having a boys' night out at Joe's place."

"Well, good for them."

"And I have a bunch of work to do myself, getting all the proposals and budget information ready for Jodi." She looked up smiling. "I can't wait for you to meet her. She's so sweet."

"And she used to be your secretary?"

"My assistant. Actually, I hardly know her. I worked with her for all of three days before I left, didn't even have a conversation with her until the last day. But I have kept in touch with her over the phone and through emails and we've actually become great friends."

"You could say that, since she's changing her entire lifestyle to come here," Maddie said.

Lisa nodded. "Well, this is a huge opportunity for her to do something she really loves and to not have to answer to some witch of a boss. Oh, sorry, Grams."

"It's okay, dear. I've learned to accept Louise for how she is. Ya know, she's really always been like that, selfish and self-centered, from the day she was born. Lawrence and I had been trying to have a baby for years. I finally got pregnant and had Louise when I was twenty-seven. I was never able to have another baby so we really doted on Louise. I suppose we spoiled her rotten. She was a very demanding child." Maddie quieted and shook her head. "I know she must have put you through hell. When she came to visit those two times I tried to get her to leave you with me, but she was bent on dragging you along with her."

Lisa sighed. "Over the last few years I realized I was nothing more than a possession to her. Something she owned. She was not willing to share me with anyone." Not even my fiancé, she thought. Her cell phone chimed and she went to retrieve it from the hall table.

"Hi Daddy," she said happily.

"Hello daughter," Joe replied. "I'm still getting used to you calling me Dad. But Daddy– you just melted me. Makes me want to let you ride the carousel and buy you a chocolate ice cream cone."

Lisa giggled. "Well, Daddy, I'll have to remember that next time I need something."

Joe sighed. "We missed all that. You know, the childhood stuff."

"I know, but we have each other now. It's funny you called because Grams and I were just talking about Lou and forgiveness. I know she did a number on you too. I was wondering, Daddy, do you forgive her?"

Joe was silent while he thought. "It's hard to say, hon. She took something from me that can't be replaced. You know, she came back to town twice while you were still a kid. Once when you were still in diapers and I didn't even know you were here until she'd taken off again. The other time, you were about ten. She came to me, said you were at Maddie's house. Said I could come and see you the next morning but I had to give her money."

"That figures. How much was a visit with me worth?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"You've got to be kidding me. You didn't pay it did you?"

"Yes, I did. I gave her everything I had in savings. Then I got up bright and early and went to Maddie's for breakfast with my daughter. I had all these plans to take you shopping for anything you needed or wanted. To make sure you knew how to contact me if you needed me, but when I got to Maddie's you were already gone. Apparently, the moment I gave her the money she picked you up and took off."

"Oh, Dad, I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, well, me too. I mean, I'm sorry I trusted her and I'm sorry I let you down, sweetheart, because I should have known. I should have demanded to see you first."

"Let's not let what she did spoil our future," Lisa said.

"I don't intend to. That's what I was actually getting at. I don't know that I can forgive her, but I've let go of the hatred and the bitterness. You have to, cuz if you don't it will eat your soul."

Lisa sighed. "I think I do understand that."

"Well, I just called to see how you're doing, sweetheart. Chaz is here and when I asked him how you were, he suggested I call you and ask you myself."

"Well, good for Chaz. I'm doing great. I'm just getting ready to sit down to dinner with Grams."

"Lisa, Chaz told me that Marcus came to visit."

"He came to apologize."

"He knows he's not supposed to get near you. I don't think it was a coincidence that he came when no one else was around."

"Well, Dad, of course it wasn't a coincidence. Marcus wanted to apologize and he assumed he may not get the chance if anyone else was around to put a stop to it. Looking back at what happened, I'd say he assumed correctly."

"Well, I for one, am not sorry for what Chaz did."

"Listen, Dad, he didn't really hurt me. Not really. I just want to forget the entire deal."

"Honey, I understand you wanting to put it all behind you. Just be careful, okay?"

Lisa smiled at the love and concern in his voice. "I promise."

⌂⌂⌂

Lisa and Maddie enjoyed a delightful dinner together and were just finished cleaning the kitchen when Lisa's cell phone rang again. Recognizing the number, she slipped upstairs to her room. "What do you want?"

There was a sniffing sound before the voice. "Hi, Lisa." Another big sniffle. "I know you don't want to hear from me, but I needed to talk to you."

He had her attention. "What's wrong Glen?" she asked, hoping someone hadn't died.

"I just can't go on. I've lost everything. Everything."

"What are you talking about?"

"Lou fired me."

Lisa was silent. She wanted to tell him he deserved what he got, but he sounded too pitiful. She knew how manipulative and cruel Lou could be. Glen had been no match for her. She finally drew a breath. "I'm sorry, Glen. Truly."

"She said having me around reminded her of you and so she was letting me go."

"Good grief, Glen, that's not legal grounds to fire someone. As a matter of fact if you add in sexual harassment you might actually have grounds for a suit."

Glen was silent while he considered this. He hadn't thought of that. He wondered if Lou had.

"I might look into that," he said softly. "Right now it's all I can do to get up every day. It almost feels like someone died."

"I understand that feeling," Lisa said softly.

"I knew you'd understand. I knew, because you're nothing like your mother."

"Yeah, well, thank God for that." Lisa said softly.

"Lisa, do you think that there's even a chance that you can ever forgive me? I hurt you, I know. But I swear, it's like I can't move on, I can't focus on anything if you can't forgive me. It's like the guilt is eating me up."

"Glen, it's over and believe me, I'm over it. I really do know how Lou can make you do things you wouldn't ordinarily do. I've seen her use and abuse people for years. She used you to hurt me. You're a grown man capable of making your own decisions, so I do hold you accountable, but I also know how she can twist things around to get you to do her bidding."

"So, is that your way of saying I'm forgiven?"

"Forgiven may not be the right word. I can let it go. You need to let it go too. That doesn't mean I want a relationship with you. Ever."

"I understand that. I totally screwed up and I lost you. I'll regret that the rest of my life."

"Well, there's no need to be so dramatic. It's over."

He drew a deep breath. "You're right. It's over. Can we just be friends and move on?"

"Friends? I don't know about that. Let's just say we're allies against a common foe."

"Lisa, you know what? You're a good person, you really are."

"Yeah. Whatever."

"I feel stoked. Like I can start again. I feel like I wanna go back through my entire life and undo past deeds and be a better person."

"I'll drink to that," Lisa mumbled.

"Funny you should say that. So, guess where I am?"

"In a bar?"

"You know me too well. But guess which bar?"

"No idea."

"I'm at the *Magnolia Bar* which is right next to the *Magnolia Gardens Motel*."

"*Magnolia Gardens*? That sounds familiar but I can't place it."

"It's on Highway seventy-two a few miles out of *Pine Forest*."

"What?"

"That's right, Lees. I'm in Georgia," he said with a chuckle.

"What are you doing, Glen?"

"I don't know. It's crazy. It's like, I kept thinking about how I treated you and I started driving. Miles went by while I tried to think how I was gonna be able to make a fresh start with my life. Then states went by and I started thinking about going to Miami, like I'd dreamed when I was a kid. The next thing I know, I was here. And all that time driving, I did a lot of soul searching and I realized I needed to make amends or I'd never be able to move on. It's taken me a few days to get up the courage to call you. I'm so glad I finally did. I feel like a new man."

"I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll come have a drink with me for old times' sake."

"Umm, Glen..."

"Don't say no, Lisa. Please. I've come all the way across the country to see you one last time. To say goodbye and to say it on good terms. Please, Lees, just one drink."

She hesitated, thinking hard. She should call Chaz but he'd probably have conniptions. "Okay, I'll be there in about an hour. One drink, Glen. That's all."

"That's great, Lisa. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to seeing you and putting this all behind me. Thank you."

"I must be out of my mind."

"No, Lisa, you're just a good person. That's all there is to it. Okay, see you soon."

Glen ended the call and noisily tossed his phone onto the table. He smiled at Marcus. "Well, then, that was easy enough."

"I have to say, I'm impressed," Marcus said.

Glen shrugged. "You're sure this Chaz guy isn't at the house?"

"Positive. He's out with friends. I have some buddies keeping an eye on him."

Glen sighed in anticipation. Ah, Lisa, he thought. I'm getting excited just thinking about it. Feeling generous, he eyed Marcus. "You wanna go first?"

"That's good of you, Glen. Don't mind if I do."

⌂⌂⌂

The moment she walked in, his imagination was way ahead of the events that would occur this night. She'll be dazed and confused, he thought. She'll realize he's gotten her to his room and she'll want to fight but she won't be able. She'll be aware, just on the fringes of consciousness, while Marcus does his thing. Then it will be his turn.

He'd done his own internet research once he and Marcus had made the decision to do it. He'd found that sometimes, rather than rendering the woman unconscious, the drug simply makes them lose their inhibitions. That's the effect he was hoping Lisa would have. He didn't want her completely zombied out. He wanted her to know what was happening.

"Hello, Glen," she said softly as she approached.

He swallowed hard in anticipation. "Hi, Lees." He stood, leaned over and bussed her cheek.

"You look beautiful." His eyes swept over her. She wore jeans and a lime green, knit top and her hair was pulled back in a clip. He held her chair for her.

"What would you like to drink?"

"I'll have a white wine."

"I'll just get it from the bar. The service here is not great."

While he moved to the bar to order her drink she looked around the joint. This was the place out on the highway that Chaz had mentioned and he was right, it really was a hole in the wall. Nevertheless, there were plenty of people here drinking and laughing and having a good time. This however, was not a family place like Joe's Bar and Grill.

Glen made it back with her wine and sat down.

"So tell me, how have you been and what have you been up to?"

⌂⌂⌂

Psalm 21:11

"Though they intended evil against You And devised a plot,
They will not succeed."

Chapter 14

"You suck," Evan mumbled as he tossed a five-dollar bill on the pool table.

"Next," Chaz announced with a grin.

Evan tossed his pool cue to Josh and made his way to the bar.

Chaz eyed his new opponent, the proclaimed county pool champion. "Get ready to have your butt handed to you."

"Well now, you're talkin' mighty big there fella," Josh crooned. "Like a man who's in love."

Next in line, Troy chuckled, eyeballing Chaz. "I'd say you hit that right on, Josh, judging from the look on his face."

"Shut up and let me break," Chaz said to Josh.

"Yep," Troy continued. "There's nothing like being in love with a gorgeous redhead to boost a man's confidence."

"How would you know?" Josh wheedled back at Troy, amongst hoots of laughter.

Chaz gave the cue ball a stout whack and watched as it nicely scattered the brightly colored balls, but then dropped neatly into the corner pocket.

Josh grinned as he moved to the table and began sinking one ball after another. Chaz never got back in the game. He ate his humble pie real sportsmanlike, laid a five on the table and then moved to join Evan at the bar.

"Hey, Joe," Chaz said as he took a seat next to his friend.

"Backatcha," Joe answered. He placed a bottle of a *First Crush* from a local brewery on the bar.

"Business looks good," Chaz remarked.

"The place is jumpin' for sure. A lot of new faces."

Chaz nodded. "I guess there's gonna be a whole lot more of that once Lisa gets things up and runnin'."

Joe nodded. "I'm lookin' forward to it. Gonna be doin' some renovating of my own."

"Really? Whaddya got in mind?"

"Gonna make a complete split of the restaurant section. I'll use up

some of the side acreage that's just sittin' there. Expand the bar, add some video games, more pool tables, larger dance floor, play up the rustic country theme."

"Does Lisa know what you're planning?"

"Not yet, but I'm sure once I tell her she'll have plenty of ideas to input and expound on."

"I'm sure she will," Chaz said, smiling at the thought of her.

⌂⌂⌂

"Would you like more wine?" Glen asked, smiling cunningly.

Lisa put her hand to her forehead. "No, I haven't even finished what I have and actually, I'm not feeling very well." Giving her head a shake, she winced. "I think I'd better be getting home."

Glen's pulse jumped. It was really working. He could feel his excitement build, but he probably needed at least another fifteen minutes before he could offer to take her home. Of course, he won't really be taking her home. He will be taking her around to his room on the backside of the motel where Marcus was already waiting.

"What's wrong? Do you have a headache?"

"No, I, uh, feel a little dizzy. A little queasy."

"I hope you're not coming down with something."

"Me too. I have a lot to do tomorrow."

He frowned. "Man, I just hate that the last time we get to see each other you get sick. Doesn't that just figure. Maybe you're allergic to me," he said with a laugh.

Lisa smiled. "Don't be shilly."

Glen's eyebrows rose at the slurring of her speech. Maybe he wouldn't need another fifteen minutes after all. "Why not? Let's be silly, Lisa. Remember when we used to be silly and do all sorts of crazy things."

Lisa laughed, leaned forward. "You mean, be– fore you mezzed around with my muutther."

"That was funny too, wasn't it Lisa?"

"Sheeing the look on your, on your, um, face when I pulled out my gun, now thaz wuzzz fun–ny."

Glen rose, went to her side. "Hey, hon. You okay?"

She nodded her head. "It's warm in here, ishn't it?"

"Maybe a little."

"Is she sick?"

Glen eyed the waitress who'd pretty much ignored him all night.

Why did she have to butt in now? "I think she's had a little too much to drink," Glen answered.

"Izzz warm in here, izzzn it?" Lisa slurred.

Glen put his arm around her and lifted her to her feet. "Come on sweetheart, I guess I need to take you home." He handed the waitress a few twenties. "I think that'll cover it."

Lisa leaned heavily on Glen as they made their way out of the bar. Opening the passenger side door, he let her slump into the seat, then lifted her legs into the car. The door made a pleasant-sounding thump, he thought, with his cargo tucked neatly inside. He ran around and settled behind the wheel for the very short trip.

A minute later he pulled up in front of his motel door, turned off the engine and turned toward Lisa. Her eyes were closed and she moaned as she tried to turn her head.

He leaned close to her, lifted her chin. "Hello, Lees," he said softly. When she only moaned in return he leaned over and kissed her. She gave a small whimper. "Don't like that, huh?" he mocked. "Well, there's not a thing you can do about it." He grinned at her, hoping Marcus worked fast.

He got out of the car and went around to her side, lifted her up into his arms and carried her to the door.

"It's about time," Marcus spat as he opened the door.

"She's heavy, man," Glen answered as he stumbled to the bed and let her drop.

"Yeah, dead weight," Marcus answered with a laugh.

Glen made a hurrying motion. "Come on. Let's get her clothes off her."

"Slow down, my friend. This stuff doesn't peak for a couple of hours. You need to slow down and enjoy it. There's no rush."

"You say that as if you have plenty of practice."

Marcus chuckled. "Oh, I've had some real good times with the pretty little girls in this town. Most of them don't even know about it." He slowly made his way to the dresser and poured two shots of Jack and held one out to Glen.

"To you, my friend. For a job well done."

Glen raised his glass. "I'll drink to that."

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Chaz paid no attention to Joe when he turned to answer the phone by the cash register. It was the look on Joe's face when he turned back

that told him something was up.

Eyes glittering with intense anger, his jaw set in stone, Joe slammed down the phone, reached up under the bar and came up with a double-barrel, twelve-gauge shotgun which he began loading. Chaz and Evan both jumped to their feet.

Joe turned to Evan. "Call Tyson, get him over to the Magnolia." He turned and yelled to his cook. "Hey, Martie, watch the place."

"What's happened?" Chaz asked.

"I gotta go kill a man."

"Now, Joe," Chaz began.

"And you're coming with me," Joe interrupted. "It's Lisa. She's in trouble."

Chaz bolted toward the door.

⌂⌂⌂

Marcus hadn't even begun when his cell phone rang. He stood up, pulled the phone out of his pocket and eyed the number. "I'd better take this," he said to Glen, turning away.

Glen rolled his eyes, his impatience growing. Lisa moaned again. Her mouth was moving like she was trying to say something. He stood over her, watching. "You know what's happening, don't ya, Lees? You know what we're getting ready to do and there's nothing you can do to stop it." He chuckled.

Marcus stuffed his phone back in his pocket. "Uh, somethin's come up. I have to go."

"You're kidding? You don't want to get yours real quick?"

"Can't. It's urgent." He ran into the bathroom, grabbed a towel and began moving around the room, wiping his prints from every surface. "You make sure you do the same before you leave here," he ordered as if he actually cared.

"Don't worry about me," Glen answered.

He waited several minutes for Marcus to be gone before he turned his attention to Lisa. This is better, he thought. He hadn't felt real comfortable about operating in front of another man. Leaning close, he grabbed her by the hair and gave a hard tug. She stirred slightly and moaned again. "I have you all to myself, now. This is much better, don't ya think? What should we do first? Huh?" His eyes lit up. "I know what we'll do."

He twisted her around so she lay straight in the bed, her head at the top, then stood back and surveyed his work. "The shoes have to go," he

commented as he jerked each sandal off and tossed it toward the door. "Now, let's see what we have in here," he muttered as he undid the snap of her jeans. She moaned and tossed her head. "What, Lisa, are you getting upset? You should be, but don't worry, I'm not gonna start down here. Just getting you ready."

She moaned softly, a sound that could've been a protest but in Glen's mind was one of pleasure. He touched her face. "You know, you're the one that totally blew it, Lees. You should've been happy that I was chosen by your mother. There were lots of guys in the company who would've given anything to be in your mother's bed. If you had just kept your cool that day, none of this would be happening. You and I would be making a fortune. We would be getting ready to travel the world together. And yeah, you would have married me and a few years later, we might have even popped out a few kids, though I could certainly do without that hassle." He sighed, gripped her face in his hand. "But you just couldn't keep that temper from getting the best of you, could you? It's your fault, Lees. All your fault. And you deserve what you're about to get, not that you'll remember it. But I will. I'm never gonna forget this night."

He let her go and rolled away, stood beside the bed. "First things first, Lees, as Lou was so fond of saying."

He knelt on the bed beside her. Sweat ran from his forehead as he tried to imagine that she was a willing participant in what he was about to do. His fingers trembled as he tugged on his zipper. He was so intent on what he was doing, that the sound of the shotgun being chambered didn't register, at least not at first. He looked up.

"Yep, you heard right," Joe said softly, nodding his head.

Glen gasped, his head jerking up to see a red-headed man looking down the sight of a shotgun aimed right at his crotch.

"Go ahead," Joe said, his voice deadly calm. "And close that up."

Glen raised his hands in the air. "I don't want any trouble, okay?"

"Oh, I'd say it's a little too late for that."

The slowly spoken words came from a younger man standing beside the one with the rifle.

Glen smiled, trying to hide the fact that he was shaking like a leaf. "Really. I don't know what you think you've walked in on, but this is all just a big misunderstanding." He motioned toward Lisa. "She's my fiancé. We were just gonna have a little fun, you know. We had some drinks at the bar and she passed out from drinking too much. This is

really a private thing between me and her."

Chaz moved forward a few steps. "Yeah, that might work back in LA where nobody knows anyone else, and everyone's worried 'bout being sued. But it won't work here. You see, we know Lisa."

"You do?"

"Everyone knows her," Chaz said.

Drawing a deep breath and keeping his hands in the air, Glen backed off the bed onto his own feet. "She's only been here about a month, how could everyone know her?"

"You wouldn't understand. It's small town stuff. Everyone knows everyone," Joe answered, his finger caressing the trigger. "But in this particular circumstance," Joe nodded toward Chaz, "he's her neighbor, and me, well, I'm her father."

Glen swallowed hard. "Her, her father?"

"Yep, he's her father," Chaz answered with a smile. "And I'm thinking he has the right to blow you away right now, but I'm gonna ask him to hold off for a bit cuz I want some time to rip you apart with my bare hands first."

Glen stepped back, the panic on his face evident.

"Now, Chaz," came a voice from just outside the door. "I don't blame you for wanting to kill this guy, but, I'm gonna need you to step aside and let the law take over."

Deputy Tyson Stewart stepped into the room, touched Joe's shoulder. "You too, Joe."

It took Joe a full minute before he lowered the gun and allowed the police to do their job.

⌂⌂⌂

"Just let me take her home," Chaz pleaded.

"She needs blood-work done, Chaz," Tyson answered. "And I know you know that. If you want the charges to stick then we need the lab tests showing what's in her system."

Chaz ran a hand through his hair and knelt down beside Lisa where she lay on a stretcher. Robert and Tim, Chaz's paramedic friends were getting ready to transport her. He knew what Tyson said was true but the need to take her home and hold her until she woke was strong.

"Is she okay?" a soft voice asked.

They turned at the voice to find a petite, young woman peering in the door with a glass of wine in her hand.

Tyson, went to her. "She's okay, thanks to you, Jenny."

Jenny nodded. "I wasn't sure what to do, but something just didn't seem right, ya know? And I knew she was Joe's daughter. Heck, everyone knows that. I watched that guy leave with her. He didn't go out the drive. He swung around to the back of the motel and I just had a feeling something was wrong cuz like, I knew she and your brother were sort of an item, so I called Joe."

"Well, Jenny, we can't thank you enough," Chaz said as he joined Tyson. "I'm truly grateful."

"I second that," Tyson said sincerely.

Jenny blushed, smiling up at her old high school beau, cleared her throat, changed the subject. "So, what happened to the guy?"

"He's been arrested and will be charged with attempted rape and with administering illegal substances."

"Wow. I should've known he was up to no good. He's been hanging out with Marcus."

"Really?" Tyson asked. "Anything else you can tell us?"

She shook her head. "No, just that they've been together drinking at least two days earlier this week. I didn't hear anything they talked about, but Marcus was his usual obnoxious self."

"If you can think of anything else, please let us know, okay?"

Jenny nodded. "I promise."

"So, what's with the glass of wine?"

She looked down at the glass. "Oh! I thought you might want to have this." She held the drink out to Tyson. "It's her wine. She never even finished one glass. That's why I knew she couldn't have been drunk so quickly. I bet there's something in it."

"I bet you're right," Tyson said with a smile. "Jenny, you're a great detective."

She smiled prettily. "Glad I could help. So, I best be gettin' back to work."

Chaz turned to watch as they wheeled Lisa to the waiting ambulance then looked over at Joe. "Let's go," he said.

"How long will she be out?" Joe asked as they drove.

"If it's Rohypnol, it peaks about two hours after ingestion but it will take her probably eight hours to sleep it off."

"Eight hours." Joe shook his head. "Good grief. Thank God Jenny called me."

Chaz nodded, he intended to do just that.

"I wanted to kill him," Joe said.

Chaz cocked his head. "Well, you had your chance before Tyson arrived. Shoulda done it. I would've backed you up."

Joe eyed Chaz. "Soo, remind me to never cross you."

Chaz smiled.

⌂⌂⌂

Her head was gonna explode, she was just sure of it. Her eyelids felt like sandpaper and her stomach roiled. Where was she? What happened? Deciding to take the chance that letting light into her eyes won't cause her to disintegrate, she opened them the tiniest slit. First thing she focused on was Grams asleep in a chair. She moved her head slightly to the left and saw her father, leaning against a wall, speaking with his wife. Lisa's sister Megan stood nearby.

She moved her head all the way to the left, which was her mistake. She moaned with the pain, shutting her eyes tight. Someone took her hand.

"Lisa?"

She smiled, because she knew the voice belonged to the man she loved. "Chaz," she whispered. "Where am I? What happened?"

There was the sound of footsteps and Lisa tried again to open her eyes. When she did she saw five beautiful faces peering down at her.

"You're in the hospital, sweetheart."

"Again?"

They all laughed. "Yes again," Chaz answered. "Do you remember what happened?"

She closed her eyes. "No. I was..." Her eyes flew open. "I was at the bar. The one at the motel. I was having a drink with Glen."

"Yes, and we'll talk more about that decision privately, but for now, what else do you remember?"

She shook her head. "I don't remember anything else. I had a glass of wine and then I wasn't feeling well, and then..." She drew a breath, held it, let it out. "Everything else is a blank."

Chaz leaned over and brushed her hair from her forehead. "It's just as well."

"What happened? Why am I here in the hospital?"

Grams took her hand. "How are you feeling, dear?"

Lisa thought a moment. "Well, I have a major headache. Will someone please tell me what happened?"

Megan moved forward. "That butt-wipe ex-fiancé of yours drugged you and took you to his motel room."

Lisa's mouth moved to form words but nothing came out. Her eyes welled up with tears.

"He didn't succeed," Shirley said quickly. "Thanks to sweet Jenny and Joe and Chaz."

She looked up at Chaz as a tear fell over onto her cheek.

Joe stroked her hair, spoke softly. "He put Rohypnol in your wine, sweetheart, and took you to his room. Jenny was suspicious and called me. Chaz and I got there just in time."

"Wh, where is he now?"

"If I had my way he'd be dead and buried," Chaz said. "But Tyson arrived in time to keep me from going to jail."

"Well, dear, he was arrested," Grams said. "But the scoundrel is already out on bond."

"Yeah, Tyson says Marcus posted his bond. He makes me sick," Megan said with vengeance.

"Marcus?" Lisa asked. "How does Marcus know Glen?"

"Well now, we don't quite know that yet," Joe said.

Lisa was silent as she considered the news. Finally she looked up. "Maybe it's like a 'hate Lisa club'."

"Oh dear, that's just nonsense," Grams said.

"He tricked me. You'd think I'd be smarter than that."

"Cain't disagree with that," Joe said softly. "So, what made you agree to have a drink with him, Lisa?" he asked.

She glanced up at Chaz's narrowed eyes before she answered. "So, he called me, and he asked me to forgive him, and Grams and I had just had a talk about forgiveness. He said he'd driven all the way across the country because of guilt and wanted to start fresh. It was supposed to be a drink for old times' sake. A ritual to begin the new and improved Glen. I can't believe I fell for it."

"Well, I gotta say, you wouldn't have if you'd taken the time to speak with any one of us," Chaz said.

Lisa sighed. "Like I said, Grams and I had just had a conversation about forgiveness, that God said to forgive, and then Glen called and it just seemed like it was what I was supposed to do."

"Oh, dear, Lisa, I am so sorry. That really means that I'm responsible," Grams murmured.

"Nonsense," Shirley put in quickly.

Joe nodded. "Lisa, a body can forgive a person without putting themselves in danger."

"Exactly, Joe," Chaz agreed, his eyebrows raised at Lisa.

"I'm so sorry," Lisa whispered.

Grams patted her hand. "It's okay, dear. You just get well."

"How long have I been in the hospital?"

"We got you here last night just before midnight. It's now nine in the morning. You were out a long time. I'm just glad you're awake now," Joe said.

"I've caused you all so much trouble."

"You're family Lisa. You're not trouble," Shirley said softly.

"That's right," all the others said together simultaneously, causing a round of laughter.

"That's right," Chaz said again, close to her ear. "You have a large and wonderful family and we all love you and care about you."

"And you're all here for me."

"Well, of course we are," Grams said.

"It really is amazing," Lisa uttered softly.

Chaz nodded. "I've been trying to teach her that in these parts, home and family is what it's all about."

"Chaz," Lisa said abruptly, sitting up straighter. "I want you to know that this has nothing to do with what you just said, but, I think I'm gonna be sick."

Joe grabbed a plastic basin. Shirley wet a wash cloth. Chaz supported her back and Grams held her hair out of the way while Lisa retched. Luckily there wasn't much on her stomach.

"Well, now that was lovely," Megan said with false cheerfulness, making everyone laugh again.

"Should we call the doctor?" Grams asked.

"The vomiting is a symptom of the drug," Chaz answered. "But what say we get a doc in here so he can sign her out of here? They only wanted to keep her until she regained consciousness. Well, she's conscious." He leaned down, kissed Lisa's forehead. "Would you like to go home?"

"Home." She smiled. "Most definitely."

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"You must be kidding. I knew Glen was a donkey's behind, but I never figured him for a criminal. Oh, my, gosh, I can't believe all the stuff that's happened to you since you've been there."

"I know. It's crazy, Jodi. I hope you're not having second thoughts about coming."

"Well, since we're already in Mississippi it's a little late to turn back. No, really, John and I can't tell you how much we're looking forward to doing this. It's such a wild and crazy adventure, coming to a new world, starting a new business, meeting all new people. I am totally psyched."

"I was hoping you'd say that. I had to give you a chance to opt out though, you know, because of the danger."

"Oh, please, Lisa, first, I am not a bit worried. I am woman, hear me roar. As for John, as I told you, he was special forces. There's not much that scares him."

"So, what time tomorrow do you think you'll be here?"

"John says we'll be there by early afternoon."

"I'm so excited to see you."

"Me too. I'll just be happy to get there. It's been a lonely drive, with John in his car towing your car and me in my car towing a trailer full of stuff. It's hard to stay awake. So, tell me some juicy stuff about this guy, Chaz. That should keep me awake for a while."

"Well, I'm in love with him."

"Totally cool. Does he know?"

"Oh, yes. Are you ready for the details?"

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Lisa's eyes flew open. Turning her head slowly, she glanced at the clock. 1:00 AM. Her stomach gripped with panic as she realized something woke her. She hadn't really heard anything. It was more a sense, a prickly feeling at the back of her neck that someone was nearby, standing over her. She had to fight the panic. Her heart was a drum in her ear. Someone is here, here in my room, she thought. How was he able to get in past the alarm? Would he kill her this time because she hadn't heeded the warning?

Quietly and slowly, she reached toward the nightstand drawer and pulled it open. She closed her eyes in gratitude as her fingers closed around the solid, cold, metal of her tiny gun, but she had no time to react when the large hand closed around hers and another clapped over her mouth. His head lowered to whisper in her ear.

"Lisa, you with a gun is hot." He moved his hand from her mouth and replaced it with his lips.

When he finally pulled away, she struggled against his strength. "Chaz Stewart, you scared me to death."

He held her still easily as he pulled the gun from her hand, placed

it back in the drawer and gently pushed it closed. "Sorry. What are you gonna do about it?"

"Let me go and you'll see. I'm gonna make you sorry you came in here trying to frighten me."

He chuckled. "I wasn't trying to frighten you, but you can keep fighting me, Lisa, cuz this is also hot." He kissed her mouth again until her mock struggles ceased as she sank into oblivion.

"That was all I thought it would be," he said with a grunt.

She laughed.

"Shhh," Chaz said with a soft laugh. "You'll wake Maddie and she'll come up here to check on you and this could prove to be a little embarrassing, what with me in your room in the middle of the night."

She rose up to look at him. He had on jeans and nothing else. Her eyes moved over him, noting the wiry hair on his stomach, his muscular chest, the curve of his biceps.

"So, what are you doing here," Lisa asked.

"I was lying there in bed, only a few feet from you and all I could think about was coming in here and kissing you."

"That's a good way to get shot," she quipped.

"Yeah, I remembered the gun at the last second. Lucky for me you're a little slow on the draw."

They were silent for several moments. It was Lisa who finally broke the silence. "So, what are you thinking about?"

He sighed. "Actually, I was thinking that I'm grateful I didn't have any, uh, episodes while sneaking in here."

"Oh."

"And I was thinking that maybe the more I do this, maybe the better it will be, you know, as far as the flashbacks."

Lisa smiled. "That's a good theory. I think I'd like to test it."

He stroked her arm. "We will. But for now, let's talk about something else."

"Okay, like what?"

"Like, why you would consent to see Glen after he beat you up in your front yard."

"Oh. That."

"Yes, that. I told you we'd talk about it later. Did you think I would just forget about it?"

"I hoped."

"Why, Lisa? Had you not had enough? You knew he was capable

of violence toward you."

She huffed out a breath. "He called and was all pitiful. Lou fired him. He said he was trying to make a fresh start and he needed my forgiveness. It was just a drink for old times' sake."

Chaz shook his head. "Women and their soft hearts. I don't have to tell you what he was gonna do?"

She shrugged. "I don't think so."

"The thought of someone hurting you, Lisa, physically or emotionally, it makes me crazy."

"I'm sorry, Chaz."

"Did you think before you left to have drinks for old time sake with this guy that maybe you shoulda given me a heads up, maybe let me know where you were going?"

She rose up in protest, but he stopped her.

"Not that you have to answer to me or check with me about anything. Of course you don't. Logically though, you love me, right? And I love you, and someone has threatened your life. I think you should've called me before you went out alone to a bar."

Logically he was right and honestly, she'd purposefully not called him. "I thought about calling you," she finally answered.

His eyes narrowed. "But you didn't because you knew I'd freak?"

When she didn't answer he rolled over next to her. "You deliberately snuck off, knowing I would be mad."

"Yes," she admitted with a mischievous grin. "I did."

"So, I guess this means I can't trust you. No matter what I think, you'll do what you want anyway."

"Hmm, I guess that," she said as she snuggled closer, "is exactly what it means."

He gave a soft laugh. "Okay, well, I'm glad we got that straight."

"Me too," Lisa said softly.

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Colossians 3:13

"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Chapter 15

"They're here!" Lisa shouted. Running into the kitchen where Grams was cutting fruit at the counter. She grabbed the tiny woman and spun her around. "They're here!"

Grams laughed. "Wonderful. Go out and welcome them and I'll be out in a moment."

Lisa kissed Grams' soft cheek and dashed to the front door. When she opened it, Jodi and John were just getting out of their respective vehicles. "Jodi!" Lisa called, running down the steps, sprinting across the gravel drive and grabbing her up in a giant bear hug.

"You're finally here! It's so good to see you."

"You too," Jodi beamed. "You look good. And different."

"Different?"

"Yeah. Happy."

Lisa laughed. "Big change, huh?"

Jodi gestured toward the man who approached and casually placed his arm across her shoulders.

Lisa's mouth hung open.

"Lisa, this is my husband, John Appel."

"Oh, my, I can't believe it," Lisa said, almost whispering.

"Well, it is an unusual name, but it's not that bad," John said, offering his hand to Lisa.

She looked up. "Oh, it's not your name. It's—just wait, you'll see." She shook his hand, then turned and swept her arm toward the house. "So, what do you think?"

Jodi grinned from ear to ear. "It's gigantic! I know you said sort of like the "Waltons" but theirs wasn't near this big."

Lisa nodded. "And it's gonna be even bigger when we get through. I have so much to talk to the two of you about, but I'm gonna be patient and actually let you get in the door before I start."

"Good," Jodi giggled. "Because a bathroom would be nice right about now."

"Come on in." Lisa led them up the steps and into the house.

"Oh man, it smells good in here," John said, sniffing the air.

"What is that?"

"That would be your supper cooking," Maddie said with a smile as she entered the room.

"I've died and gone to heaven," John said.

"Well, now, I think I like you," Maddie answered with a chuckle, looking up at John. Her mouth opened wide. "Lisa..."

Lisa interrupted before Grams could make the comment. She wanted it to be a shock to Jodi and John. "Grams, please meet Jodi and John Appel. Jodi, John, my wonderful grandmother."

Jodi tried to extend a hand in greeting but Maddie reached up and hugged her neck first and then John's. "Welcome to the *Pine Forest Inn,*" Maddie said, beaming with pride.

"Thank you, Mrs. Lewis," Jodi said.

"Oh, please, you must call me Grams. Or Maddie. You're Lisa's business partner so that makes you part of the family."

"I'll call you anything you want, Maddie," John said. "Just tell me, what are you cooking?"

Maddie smiled up at the tall man. "You're smelling stuffed chicken breasts, roasted garlic mashed potatoes, steamed broccoli, buttermilk biscuits and apple pie."

"I think I'm gonna cry," John uttered.

Maddie clapped her hands. "We'll have none of that. Let's get you in and settled and supper will be ready in about an hour. That will give you time to rest and get oriented."

Lisa led them up the stairs and down to the far end of the hall. "I've put you down here for now. Thought you might enjoy the privacy. Eventually our rooms will be up there." She pointed toward the ceiling.

"In the attic?" Jodi asked, eyebrows raised.

"Wait 'til you see it up there. It's huge, and there are these wonderful dormer windows and gorgeous hardwood floors, or they will be gorgeous as soon as they're refinished. I'll take you up there later. You're gonna be pleasantly surprised."

She opened the door to the "blue room" and stood back to let Jodi and John precede her.

"Wow, this is just great," Jodi said as her eyes swept over the room, taking in the fireplace on the far wall, the old wallpaper with the tiny cornflower print, the white lace curtains tied back with blue satin ribbons and the patchwork quilt done in multiple shades of blue and trimmed in white eyelet.

Lisa turned to John. "What do you think? I hope it's not too feminine for you."

John smiled. "Well, I'm not intimidated at all by feminine things." His eyes swept the room. "Just look at that fireplace. And these huge glass windows. This must be the original glass. The feng shui in here is great."

"Good then," Lisa said with a smile. "I'll leave you to get unpacked. I'll be downstairs in the new little office I've fixed up in what I believe used to be a sewing room. Do you want me to help get some things out of your cars?"

"Don't be silly, Lisa, John will get it, won't you, John?"

"You know I will. For you, babe, anything."

Lisa smiled. "That's enough to make me swoon."

"Really?" John said. "Hmm, maybe I could handle two beautiful females hanging all over me."

"Maybe you could, but I can't," Jodi said, hands on hips. "Now go get the luggage."

He saluted. "Yes, ma'am."

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"Are we late for, uh, what was it you called it? Supper?" John laughed. "Supper. I like that."

"You're right on time," Maddie answered with a smile. "You'll get used to the southern sayings. Now y'all go sit in there. I thought we'd eat in the dining room tonight. I'll call Lisa. She gets to workin' and forgets what time it is."

They walked through the kitchen and out the other side into the huge dining room.

"I can't get over how large everything is. Just look at this dining room table. It could seat fifty people easy," Jodi remarked. "Did the original owners have like twenty-five kids?"

Maddie laughed. "From what I was told by my husband when we bought this place, it was built in the late eighteen hundreds by a doctor and his wife who intended to live here with their two children and also run a hospital or clinic on the second floor. That's why there are so many bedrooms."

"How many are there?"

"Ten on the second floor. Down here there is one large bedroom which is where my husband and I always slept, and three smaller rooms that I think may have been servants or domestic quarters."

"Which one did my mother use?" Lisa asked as she joined them.

"Louise slept in the small room just down the hall from the kitchen when she was little. Then she moved all the way up to the blue room, that you're in now, Jodi. She said she wanted to be as far away from us as possible."

"That figures," Lisa said with a frown and turned to her friends. "Did you get settled in okay?"

"Almost. John still has to unhitch your car. We're gonna wait until after dinner to unload the trailer and then we have to go turn it in tomorrow."

"Everyone have a seat," Maddie directed.

"Oh, no, Grams, not this time. We're gonna help bring the food in," Lisa countered.

Within minutes, the four of them had supper on the table. "This room is amazing," Jodi said to Maddie as they sat. "It's so big."

"We hardly ever eat in here," Maddie said. "It's a shame because Lawrence built this big ol' table himself."

"It's well done," John said, running his hand over the polished wood. "Beautifully done."

"I've only actually been in this room a few times," Lisa said. "The way it sits on the other side of the living room with the fireplace in between, it's like it was built as an afterthought."

"All you have to do is turn those windows there into French doors that open out onto a veranda and the flow of traffic will move that direction," John said.

"See why I keep him around?" Jodi said with a grin.

Lisa nodded. "He's absolutely right. I wonder where Chaz is. I thought he'd be home by now."

"I can't wait to meet him."

Maddie nodded. "I think I hear him now."

Jodi frowned. "I didn't hear a car."

"Not a car," Lisa said. "A horse." The back door slammed.

"Sorry I'm late," Chaz called from the kitchen. "I'll wash up and be right in."

He appeared in the doorway a minute later, smiling, hat in hand. "Hey everyone."

John stood, mouth agape. Chaz eyed him closely.

Jodi gasped. "Oh, my."

Chaz moved forward and offered his hand to John. "It's amazing,"

he said, eyeing the man who seemed to be the exact same height and build as himself.

"I'm dumbfounded," John offered. "I mean, you could be my twin brother."

"Or you could be mine. I'm thinking I'm gonna have to have a long talk with Mom," Chaz said with a laugh.

"More likely, your dad," Lisa added, her eyebrows raised.

"So now I get why you looked at him so funny earlier," Jodi said to Lisa.

Lisa smiled. "I decided not to say anything until Chaz got here, just for the fun of seeing how you guys would react."

"Well, it certainly is uncanny," Maddie said. "But there's always room for two big hunky twin guys in this house."

Her words made everyone laugh.

Maddie's eyes twinkled. "Chaz, dear, please sit down before the food gets cold."

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. "Yes, ma'am."

He leaned close to Lisa next. "Umm, hello there." His lips brushed her cheek and lingered before he took his seat.

Miss Maddie bowed her head and quickly gave thanks for the food and nodded. "Dig in!"

"Long trip?" Chaz asked, to start the conversation.

"Long but exciting," Jodi answered. "Looking forward to learning a whole new way of life."

The polite bits of conversation lasted only until their plates had been properly filled, and the first forkfuls of food had been placed in respective mouths. Then there was silence. Looks of surprise. And then soft moans of delight.

Maddie grinned.

"I'm gonna get fat," Jodi mumbled.

"I know," Lisa said. "That's what I keep saying. That's why I've been making sure I go running every morning. It helps. And we'll be putting in a fitness room and a pool and sauna, so we'll be okay if we can just show a little restraint."

"Good luck," John mumbled with his mouth full of food.

Dinner conversation was delightful as they got to know each other. Chaz was pleased to learn that John knew how to ride and offered him a tour of the ranch as soon as the women let him have some free time. Jodi and Lisa couldn't stop talking about all the plans for the

renovations, of prospective employees, and the town itself which Jodi wanted to go back and explore shop by shop.

Afterward, Chaz offered and then insisted that he do dishes while Lisa took Jodi and John on a tour of the house and explained the changes that needed to be made.

Lisa led Jodi and John into the front room. "Let's start in the living room at the door so you can see what a client is gonna see." They stood by the door and tried to see how things would look after the renovations. Lisa's arm swept out to her right. "This room is huge and has great high ceilings and just look at the woodwork. I suppose you can call it rustic country. New paint and the right window treatments will do wonders in here. It's such a big space, and I really love the exposed beams and the giant fireplace sharing a wall with the dining room, which, you just saw, is also gigantic."

"Yes," Jodi said. "And what if we take out the wall on either side of the fireplace, opening up the room to the dining area and leaving only the fireplace as a center point for the two rooms," Jodi added.

Lisa frowned as she thought over the suggestion. "I think that would be perfect. Just perfect! And we'll widen the door from the kitchen into the dining room. Make it a swinging double door."

"Right. Oh, this is going to be wonderful," Jodi said. "So, living room, dining and kitchen are all off the right of the stairs. What's off to the left?"

Lisa moved to a room to the left and pushed two old sliding wooden pocket doors apart. "The music room," she said with a smile. The room was large and sported a piano and many built-in shelves filled with old trinkets, clocks, figurines and a few books. Lisa pointed to a door on the adjoining wall. "Through that door is the hall that leads out of the kitchen back behind the stairs there. Grams' bedroom is down there, right behind this room, a study, two more smaller bedrooms and the sewing room I mentioned earlier and two more rooms that I can't figure out what they were used for. Come on, I'll show you."

As they walked she continued. "There's only one bathroom on this level just beside the kitchen, and only two upstairs. Putting a bathroom in every room is gonna be the biggest expense. We'll actually have to lose two of the bedrooms upstairs in order to swing it. I'll show you the proposals from three different contractors tomorrow. And we'll have to put two bathrooms in the attic for when we move up there."

Jodi was grinning from ear to ear. "It's wonderful, Lisa. I can already see how marvelous it's gonna be. What do you think, John?"

"I think the back den will make a great workout room and I can also teach some martial arts classes. The room right next to the office slash sewing room is where I can offer massages."

Lisa smiled. "It's really gonna happen, isn't it? We really are gonna do this and it's gonna be a great success."

Jodi hugged her. "Absolutely."

"So, tell me, honestly, what do you two think?"

"I think we're gonna have our very own business that is gonna make us a good living and, more importantly, we're gonna be doing something we really enjoy," Jodi said.

"And you, John?" Lisa asked.

"I think the same, but have more questions."

"Shoot."

"Air conditioning?"

"Already on that. Obviously, the old system right now barely cools the place. It will have to be completely revamped."

"Good. We want to keep the integrity of old country living, but New Yorkers will never want to come back if they can't get cool."

"That's right. We need to have the best of both worlds."

"The front porch is great," John continued, "but will need to be widened. And we'll have to consider a parking area that won't mess up the graceful entrance. What does the back look like?"

"It's pretty bad. It needs a complete makeover. The back porch is very small. We'll need to build a deck and patio and put in the pool and surrounding landscape, keeping in mind, of course, our rustic country theme."

"Of course. I hope you don't intend to take down those gorgeous pecan trees," John said.

"Never. I've grown to really love trees since I've been here. Come on, I'll show you upstairs."

The tour continued to each bedroom and then up to the attic. Finally, they made their way out the kitchen door to the backyard where Chaz was talking to Beebe and Maddie sat in a rocker on the small porch.

"Enjoy the tour?" Maddie asked.

"Oh, yes," Jodi said. "We're very excited to get the ball rolling."

John and the girls moved out into the backyard, where Lisa

showed off Maddie's garden to Jodi. John joined Chaz by the post where the horse was tied. "She's a beauty," John said.

"She is that, aren't ya girl," Chaz whispered close to her ear.

"What's her name?"

"Beebe. Stands for Big Beauty."

John nodded and gave her an affectionate rub. "You are a big girl, huh?" he said.

"Over sixteen hands. She's a sweetheart. Feel like a ride?"

John's eyes lit up. "Sure. You sure you don't mind? Or, should I ask, are you sure she won't mind?"

"She's letting you near her, so, that says a lot right there. She's not for a beginner though. Sometimes she can be a little obstinate. You've got some experience under your belt, right?"

"Some. I'm not an expert, but I've ridden since I was about sixteen. I used to help out during the summers on a riding trail. You know, a rent-a-horse type set up."

"Well, let's just see what Beebe thinks," Chaz said with a smile.

John moved to Beebe's side. Chaz stepped out of the way and John swung up onto Beebe's back. He leaned forward, stroked her neck a few times before he straightened. Chaz nodded his approval, patted the mare's head. "You behave," he whispered.

John waved at Jodi, turned and took Beebe on a stroll of the property. Chaz watched for a few minutes, making sure Beebe didn't pull any of her antics, before he turned back to the women. His eyes roamed over Lisa. She wore the skirt she'd worn the night they'd visited Wilson's lake. He met Lisa's stare. Smiled at her. Wanted her. Needed her.

"So, Chaz," Jodi began. "Lisa tells me you're in on all this."

"In deep," Chaz said with a laugh. "She's got me roped into taking a bunch of citified exec types around the ranch and letting them pretend to be cowboys."

"It'll be a seller," Jodi said, turning to Lisa. "Especially if you put Chaz's picture on the brochure, doing all those manly type activities. Women will come in droves. And they'll all be trying to get him into the hayloft."

Lisa frowned. Chaz smiled. "Really? Maybe, this won't be so bad after all."

"I might just relegate you to supplying the organic, grass-fed beef and get some other ranch to accommodate me."

"Aw, come on, sweetheart," Chaz said. "No one can accommodate you like I can."

Maddie chuckled from her place in the wooden rocker.

Chaz shrugged. "Sorry, Miss Maddie. Didn't mean to be crass." He turned. "But really, Lisa, about the ladies trying to get me into the hayloft, you know I love only you."

Lisa's face turned pink. He'd never said those words in front of anyone else. Suddenly it seemed more real. Maybe that's why weddings take place in front of witnesses. To declare your love for each other in front of a bunch of people, that's brave. And scary. She smiled at him. And oh, so, sweet.

He came to her, took her arms and put them up around his neck. "Whaddya say when John comes back, I take you for a ride?"

She looked up at him trying to decide if he was using another double entendre. It struck her again, what a beautiful man he is. Large, tough, tan, and rugged, with a brilliant smile and mischief in his eyes. Standing so close to him now she was almost overwhelmed by the complete maleness of him. She was not a simpering female, but he made her want to be, so he would scoop her up in his arms and carry her away. Lord have mercy, she thought, wrinkling her nose. I'm thinking like an idiot.

"You don't have to if you don't want," Chaz said, his smile gone.

"Huh?" Lisa answered. "I'm sorry, I lost my train of thought."

Jodi giggled. "Lisa, I think he was talking about taking you for a ride– on the horse."

Chaz grinned at Jodi. "Was I?"

Jodi gave a burst of laughter. "You two are cute, and suddenly I'm very tired. I think John and I will go to bed early. Think he'll accommodate me?"

Maddie chuckled again. "I like her, Lisa. You choose your friends well."

"Ohhh, thank you, Miss Maddie," Jodi said sweetly. She went up the porch steps to plant a kiss on Maddie's cheek. "I like you too."

"Well, that's a good thing," Chaz said. "Since we're all gonna be together quite a bit." He turned as John approached, dismounted. "How she do for ya?"

"She's a real beauty and a lady."

Chaz took the bridle. "That's my girl." Beebe nibbled at his shoulder, nudged him. "Yeah, I love you too, girl."

"John, I'm suddenly so very tired. Would you mind if we unload the rest of the trailer in the morning?"

His brow furrowed. "Don't mind a bit. You okay?"

"I'm fine."

"John, I'll be happy to help you unload in the morning before I head out," Chaz offered.

"I'll take you up on that. Appreciate it." He took Jodi's hand. "Are you sure you're okay? Any more nausea?"

"Joh-on," Jodi whined.

"Oops, sorry, honey. It slipped."

Jodi glanced at Lisa's raised eyebrows. "Sooo, I wasn't gonna tell you yet, you have so much going on right now."

"Tell me what?"

Jodi looked back at John with a frown. He responded with a shrug. "Sorry, babe."

"Well, we're gonna find out sooner or later, so you may as well fill them in now," Maddie said, raising up from her chair. "And don't you worry about a thing. We're gonna take good care of you."

"What are you talking about?" Lisa demanded. "Are you sick?"

Chaz grinned. "Hurry and tell her before she goes berserk."

Lisa whirled on him. "You know what it is?"

"Just figured it out."

"We're gonna have a baby," Jodi said. "Due in February."

Lisa's jaw dropped. "A baby?"

Jodi nodded her head, her hand going to her abdomen, even though there was no sign of a baby yet. "We found out just before we left." She grimaced. "Lisa, I hope you're not upset. It wasn't planned but I promise it won't slow me down."

"Upset? No, of course I'm not upset. Just surprised. Wow." She smiled. "Wow. We're gonna have a baby!"

"I was hoping that would be your reaction."

John scooped her up. "Let me get you up to bed."

"An offer I can't refuse," Jodi said, giggling.

Chaz turned to Maddie. "Okay, so, Miss Maddie, is there anything you need?"

"Oh, no, dear. I'm headed inside. Lisa's got me all plugged in to the internet and taught me how to navigate. I've been scouting Pinterest and checking out all the latest in recipes and trends. I'm getting hooked. I even have an email address. I'm gonna go check it right

now."

Chaz grinned at Lisa as Maddie left them. "That was very thoughtful of you."

"It's lovely how happy and free she seems to be, isn't it?"

"It is. Maybe that's what we should be doing for the elderly at retirement homes. Bring them computers instead of puppies."

Lisa nodded. "It really does open the entire world up to them. Maddie loves it so much, she wants me to come to a meeting of the ladies auxiliary and teach them all how to email each other."

"That should be a real hoot."

"It will, won't it? Maybe I can get Jodi to help me. I think it will do them all some good. I believe in technology."

"Me too, as long as it doesn't take over your life. Right now, I'd like to get back to basics. How about that ride?"

"Thought you'd never ask."

Chaz moved toward Beebe, rubbed her neck, gathered the reins. He bent down and formed his hand into a cup. "Just step here and I'll boost you up."

She did as instructed. A few moments later he was seated behind her, one arm wrapped around her waist. "Do you remember anything from the lesson Troy gave you?"

"Hmm, it seems he was sitting a lot closer than you are."

"What?"

Lisa laughed. "Just kidding. He was on his own horse."

"Ha ha. Who did he have you ride?"

"A big old guy named Rocky."

"Good. Rocky is a gentle giant. He follows the horse in front of him. You don't even have to guide him."

"So I found, but that doesn't really teach me anything does it?"

"Nope. Here." Chaz handed the reins to Lisa.

She took them. "Umm, giddyup," she said softly, but Beebe didn't move.

Chaz placed his hands over Lisa's. "So, you just tug a little to the side, like this."

"But won't that make her go around in a circle?"

"If you kept the reins tight to the side, yes, but once she starts moving, you let up, and she'll go straight."

Chaz put pressure on Lisa's hands and Beebe started forward at a slow walk.

Lisa gasped.

"Okay now," Chaz said softly. "You're doing fine."

Lisa looked back at him, wide-eyed. "Okay. So, which way do you want to go?"

"Head toward the back left corner. I'll show you how I get here from my house."

Once they arrived at the edge of the woods, Beebe began to prance nervously. Chaz immediately took the reins. "What is it, girl?" he asked, peering around, not noticing anything unusual. "What's got you scared?"

She nickered, tossing her head which startled Lisa.

"Stay calm, babe," Chaz ordered. He tightened his hold on the reins and got Beebe under control. "Might be a snake nearby. Let's get a move on," he said, snapping the reins and tightening his hold on Lisa at the same time. Lisa squealed as Beebe shot forward. In only a few minutes they emerged from the woods, coming out at the road where Lisa had once run out of gas. They crossed the road and entered the ranch from a side gate.

"You don't mind helping me take care of the horses, do you? I can take you back to the house first if you'd rather. You're not really dressed for it."

"No, that would be silly. I'd love to come with you. And I can work in a skirt as well as jeans."

An hour later, Chaz and Lisa walked from the stable, leaving the horses fed, watered, groomed and bedded. The sun had gone down and the evening was warm, alight with fireflies and abuzz with night sounds. Chaz took Lisa's hand. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

Lisa shook her head. "No, not too bad, but I can say that I now have a new appreciation for all you do."

Chaz grinned. "Well, now, I like that." He stopped and pulled her to him. "That deserves a kiss." She tasted so sweet. He just couldn't get enough of her.

"I can see into your parents' house from here," she whispered.

"They can't see us."

She smiled, but shook her head. "No."

"Come on," he said, tugging on her hand.

They circled around in the dark past the back of the house, which Lisa saw included a swimming pool and elaborate patio/deck structure. They crossed through a garden, past a gazebo and finally to a small

picnic table that sat near the edge of a stream. "Oh, how lovely," Lisa purred, moving toward the water. "Is that the same creek that goes past my house way back in the woods?"

"Yep."

She looked back at him. "Not feeling very talkative?"

"Nope. Got other things on my mind."

She smiled. "Like what?"

He gripped the side of the table. "Like you."

Her stomach did a little flip-flop.

He gestured behind him. "Can't see into the house, can you?"

"No," she said with a smile, walking toward him.

He grabbed her and swung her up onto the table. Taking her face in his hands, he lowered his mouth to hers.

Lisa couldn't get over the feelings Chaz could create in her. Whenever he kissed her it was as if he possessed her soul. He made her feel like she would give him anything, do anything for him. Anything. His calloused hands touching her face always thrilled and delighted. Being with him each day felt new, it felt good, felt right. Kissing him was pure pleasure and she wished he'd never stop. But then, he did. He stopped and he stepped away.

She opened her eyes as he pulled her up to stand. "Are we already done?"

He had to clear his throat. "For now."

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1 Corinthians 10:13

"No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

Chapter 16

"Couldn't sleep?" Chaz said as he entered the kitchen later that night to find John apparently washing dishes at the sink.

"Well, Jodi was craving something sweet and I couldn't find any ice cream but Maddie's rice pudding seemed to do the trick. But, ya know, I didn't want to leave a mess my very first night here, so I'm just doing up the few dishes."

"Good idea."

John turned to eye Chaz, taking note of the gun in the waistband of his jeans. "How about you? Couldn't sleep?"

Chaz slumped down at the kitchen table. "Heard noises and got up to investigate. Not taking any chances. Guess you heard what's happened to Lisa since she's been here."

"Heard someone doesn't want her around. Heard that same someone broke in and sliced her open. Heard about Lisa being drugged and I heard about the cat."

"Yeah, so, I'm scared to leave her alone, so I moved in."

"No ideas as to who wouldn't want her around?"

"Oh, I have ideas all right, but it still doesn't make any sense. She's no threat to anyone. Anyone except Andrea that is."

John joined Chaz at the table. "Who's Andrea?"

"The girl who lives on the other side. The back of their property backs up to Maddie's. The girl fancies herself in love with me."

"And you think she'd try to hurt Lisa because of that?"

"I wouldn't have thought so, until she cornered me last month and told me something that totally blew me away."

"What was that?"

Chaz sat quietly for a moment, wondering if he dared chance a conversation that would involve speaking of the death of his wife and child. Yet, even as he thought about it he realized, the pain had lessened and he found himself wanting to talk.

"Hey, if it's something you don't want to talk about, that's cool."

Chaz glanced up. "Sorry. No, it's okay. I think I can talk about it. So, I was married once." He paused a moment. Swallowed hard.

"Three years ago my wife and two-year-old daughter were killed in a car accident. Drunk driver."

"Oh, man."

The words were uttered softly. Chaz looked up to see the tough, special forces Marine veteran with nothing but heartfelt compassion in his eyes. Chaz looked down quickly, getting control of his own emotions. His intention had been to tell just enough to explain what Andrea had said, but suddenly he wanted to say more. "She was a blond-haired, brown-eyed baby girl. So beautiful. She laughed all the time, ya know? Giggled."

"What was her name?"

"Julie." He sighed. "Sweet, sweet Julie. My wife's name was Cari. She was so protective of that baby girl. She hovered over her, went crazy if she even scraped a knee. I know I shouldn't think this way, but I can't help it– I keep wondering if Cari died hearing the screams of the baby. It would've been agony for her, ya know, not being able to get to her, to comfort her. I keep hoping they went together." His voice broke.

John stayed quiet while Chaz got himself together. Chaz finally looked up. "Sorry, man."

"Hey, you don't have to apologize to me. That's enough to break anyone. So, Jodi, tells me you were a paramedic."

Chaz nodded. "*Was*. After I found them like that, I fell apart. Just couldn't do it anymore."

"You found them?"

"I was on duty that night. Arrived on scene. I lost it."

John uttered a soft curse. "I'm sorry, man. That's bad."

"Yeah, whatever." He sighed. "In the past. Have to move on."

John looked him over. "Actually, you have to heal and I can see that you're not there yet."

Chaz's eyebrows rose in question.

John smiled. "Before you take my head off, let me just say that I have some experience with this."

"Look, man, I was in Iraq myself," Chaz said. "A corpsman. I've seen some horrible stuff. Limbs blown off, faces mangled, eighteen-year-old kids screaming for their mothers, but nothing comes close to finding my wife with her head bashed in and my kid's body mangled and bloody hanging upside down in her car seat."

John nodded. "I'm sure and I'm not saying otherwise. What I *am* saying is, I know about trauma and I've learned to deal with it,

meaning, I've learned to heal it. It's one of my professions. I can help you. If you'll let me. Now's not the time to go into it, but maybe another day. We'll talk."

Too tired to argue, Chaz let it go and changed the subject. "So, you were special forces, right? A fellow Marine?"

John nodded. "Yes, a Raider. I gave everything I had. Finally had to get out. Saw too much. Thought too much. Killed too much."

"You regret it?" Chaz asked.

"No. Can't live in regret. I mean, I've made mistakes that I regret, but I don't regret my life decisions. Every experience makes us what we are today. I saw fighting for our country not just as a duty but as something I wanted to do. I've always believed that if there is a bully on the playground hurting the other innocent kids, it was up to the strongest 'good guy' to do what had to be done, even when the teacher looks over and all she sees is the 'good guy' pounding on the bully and she ends up punishing that 'good guy.'" He shook his head.

"I used to see everything in black and white. Then, I began to see gray areas. Everything started to blend together. I became uncertain if everything I was doing was the best thing, so I got out. But I tell ya, I've done things, Chaz, that would sicken you. I've killed. I've maimed. I've made god-like decisions that I will have to live with the rest of my life. I've seen things that I couldn't get out of my head. Until I went to see the man who helped me and healed me, I was a basket case. And so I became a healer myself."

Chaz scrubbed his hands over his face. "I thought to be a healer once. I went to medical school. Had a few years under my belt when I joined the Marines."

"Thought about going back?"

"Was working on it back before my wife and kid died. Haven't thought about it since."

"Is it something you really wanted to do?"

"Good question. Have to think about that one."

"That's your answer right there. So, back to the original story. What does this Andrea girl have to do with the accident?"

"Nothing, except she let me know that she thought it was meant to be. You know, like God made it happen to clear the way so she and I could be together."

"Huh, so she IS sick enough."

"Exactly. So I wouldn't put it past her to try to do something to

hurt Lisa, since she knows Lisa and I are together."

"But it was a man who cut Lisa?"

"Yes, but I can't help wondering if Andrea got someone to do it."

"You really think she would go that far?"

"I really don't know. I think the sickness runs in the family, though. It was her brother who took Lisa out on a date a few weeks ago. The date went south real fast when the pass he made at her escalated into attempted rape."

"What the– is he dead?"

Chaz snorted. "I got in a few licks after the fact. It was Lisa who did the major damage, thank God."

John nodded. "Good for her. And I've heard from Jodi the latest, with the roofie and Lisa's ex."

"Yeah, I wanted to kill that one. If my younger brother hadn't shown up, I may have."

"Your brother's the cop, right?"

"He's a Deputy Sheriff. He's a good man. Always liked solving puzzles. Has some theories about who it is that wants Lisa gone. I know he thinks Andrea's brother Marcus is involved."

"And so do you."

"I do. Unfortunately, we're walking on hallowed ground. His uncle is county magistrate. It's hell trying to get a search warrant to begin with. Still, we *will* figure it out. Meanwhile, I'd like to try to keep anything else from happening to Lisa. I mean, enough is enough, don't ya think?"

"Absolutely. Tell you what. What do you say I give Lisa a few lessons in self-defense?"

"I'd say that would be a good thing."

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"The weakest targets in a man are those that he can't actually strengthen. Eyes, throat, groin and knees. And you have strong weapons. The bottoms of your feet, your elbows, hammerfists and palm heel strikes."

Lisa nodded, trying hard to take in every word that John said. Jodi stood beside her, helping to position her when needed.

"I'm gonna teach you to focus on four goals if you were to be attacked. One, get your head out of the way of his hits, two, prevent him from choking you, three, prevent penetration, and four, kick the heck out of him."

The lesson became steadily more intense and by the end of the second hour Lisa was exhausted but revved. The feeling of power that came over her was seductive and fascinating. She'd just finished thrashing John when Chaz appeared on the back porch. He gave her a standing ovation.

Lisa looked up grinning and took her bows.

"You don't waste any time," Chaz said to John.

John smiled. "No time like the present, my teacher always said."

Chaz sat wearily on the top step. "You're speaking of your special forces trainer?"

The girls and John joined Chaz, to take a well-earned rest, each sprawling across one of the back porch steps.

"No, I started long before that. When I was a teenager, I was extremely lucky to be able to learn from Master Kino before he stopped teaching regular classes. Now his schools are nationwide."

"Kino? As in Ricky Kino's father? " Chaz asked.

"That's him. He's an amazing man and a good friend."

"That Ricky Kino is a scrumptious hunk of man," Lisa added.

Chaz eyed her, thinking of the martial arts movie icon. "Whatever." He looked back at John. "Anyway, your Master Kino married that woman, the MART winner, didn't he? The one from right here in Georgia?"

"Shelley Adams," Jodi supplied. "Small world isn't it?"

"They have a child now. She's like three or four. Gorgeous kid," John added, thinking too late of the effect his words may have on Chaz. He caught the look of pain before Chaz was able to mask it. He made a mental note to himself to speak with Chaz soon about helping him. "Master Kino stopped teaching regularly last year, but he keeps a close eye on his schools, and presides over black belt testing sometimes. Ricky actually teaches some when he's not making movies. He's a good guy. He's not all full of himself like you'd expect a big star like him to be."

"That's cool," Chaz said.

"Speaking of small worlds, remember back a few years ago when that guy raped and tortured Master Kino's wife?" Lisa asked.

"Yeah, I remember that," Chaz said.

"It took her a while to get over it," John said.

"The guy who kidnapped her, his name was James Crane," Lisa went on. "He owned *Golden Hotels*, that is before he died. That's how

Lou was able to step in and take control."

"Strange how we're all connected," Jodi added.

"Strange or meant to be," John said.

Lisa eyed Chaz. "You're a mess," she said, changing the subject. "Somebody roll you around in the dirt?"

Chaz chuckled. "As a matter of fact they did. One named Brownie and one named Bucky who, by the way, was aptly named."

"You got thrown?" Jodi asked.

"Several times. Trying to break two new horses today. They didn't want to be broken. So, I'm moving a mite slow. Got bruises on my bruises."

"Did you finally succeed?"

"Nope. Not yet, but I will. They just have to get to know me. I've gentled much meaner than those two," he said, smiling and glancing in Lisa's direction.

She frowned. "Don't you dare compare me to a horse."

He grinned. "What makes you think I was talking about you?"

"So," Jodi interrupted. "I understand we have some huge plans for the 4th."

Chaz nodded as he winked at Lisa. "That we do. Fourth of July is a big deal around here. Most everyone here is involved in the big parade over in Macon. Big production. Our high school band is marching, town dignitaries will be riding, sport stars, different floats, horsemen and women, even the little dance school will be marching. Then we'll all come back to our little town where all of main street will be turned into a giant fair. There will be amusement rides, shops and crafts and everything in the world you'd want to eat. Fried turkey legs, fried chicken, some of the world's best barbeque, watermelon, homemade ice cream, hotdogs, hamburgers, cotton candy, you name it, I bet you can find it."

"Sounds like a blast," John said.

"Oh, it is. There'll be bands of all kinds. Some country. Some rock. The high school choral department will give us a patriotic show. Then to top it all off, we'll all go over to Wilson's Lake for a fireworks display. It's small town Georgia at its best."

"I detect a note of pride," Lisa said.

Chaz nodded. "That's right, you do."

Lisa turned to Jodi and John. "See? That's exactly what I'm banking on. What person would want to pass up something like this?

I mean, a real Fourth of July celebration, in the heart of the south! Take a trip back in time to when things were simple. I love it."

"Gotta get some good pictures," Jodi added.

"I was hoping you could take care of that this time. Next year, we'll be able to hire a professional photographer."

Jodi nodded. "I think I can do it. I have a good eye and a decent camera. This is gonna be great fun."

The screen door slammed and all four faces looked up at Maddie. "Okay, younguns," the tiny lady said, hands on hips. "I've got eight apple pies to bake, three pans to fill with potato salad, another two with coleslaw and a slew of chocolate chip cookies to get out so I'll take any volunteers brave enough to work in my kitchen."

"I'd do anything to stay on your good side," John said.

The rest echoed that line of thought.

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Lisa sat up slowly, forcing herself to stay calm. Without making any noise she slid open the night table drawer and felt for her gun. The panic began to rise when she realized it was gone. Her mind raced back to the night Chaz had come to her. Did he take the gun? Did she put it in another hiding place? Why couldn't she remember?

There it was again. The noise that had awakened her. She sat very still, listening, her breath coming fast, perspiration beginning to trickle down her forehead. How fast could she make it across the hall to Chaz's room? Someone was in the house. It could be Jodi or John making a snack, she thought, trying to rationalize her fear. Yet, something wasn't quite right. Gathering her courage she eased off her bed, tiptoed to her door and eased it open. Quickly and quietly she moved across the hall to Chaz's bedroom and slipped inside.

The room was empty, the bedclothes in utter disarray. She smiled, thinking of his bedroom in his home and his messy ways. It didn't bother her. So, it must be Chaz downstairs. Smiling she tiptoed down the steps to the kitchen. Her mouth fell open.

"Mother!"

The small woman turned sharply, grinning at her daughter. "How many times have I told you not to call me that?"

"Sorry," Lisa said, before she could stop herself. "What are you doing here?"

"Did you think I would just let you come here and take what is rightfully mine?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I've heard all about your plans for making a fortune on this dump. Sorry, little girl, but it's not gonna happen."

Lisa stood up straighter, battling the need to cringe whenever her mother spoke to her. "You have no say as to what happens here. The farmhouse, the land, everything is mine. Grams gave it to me. To me, Moth-er, because she knew I'd appreciate it for what it is."

"Well, Lisa, you little brat, she had no right and I'll get a court order to stop her," Lou answered.

"Why? Why would you do that? You don't care about this place? You left here twenty-six years ago. Why do you want to come back now? Why?" Lisa cried.

Lou shook her head. "Don't you know? Because of you, Lisa. You. You belong to me. You are mine. Everything you do, everything you have is mine. I created you. You wouldn't exist if not for me. I pushed you out of my body. I stuffed bottles in your mouth in the middle of the night to shut you up. I paid my hard earned money to take you to the doctor when you got sick and to feed you and buy you all the right clothing."

"Did you love me mother?" The words, uttered so softly, were barely audible.

"Look at you," Lou said, disgust dripping from her voice. "Standing there with that mess of red hair hanging down in your face, tears running down your cheeks. Poor little Lisa. That's how everyone saw you. All my friends. All the men in my life. You tried to take them all away from me. You were so greedy. How could I love that? You're a weak, pitiful little girl. How could I love that?"

Lisa raised her chin. "I don't know why I asked the question. You're impossible to reason with. Did you know that the rest of the world doesn't think like you? You're the odd one. I didn't know that, not all the way, until recently."

"The rest of the world is weak," Lou said with disgust.

"Nevertheless, Mother, you have no control over me. Not anymore. I am my own person. I don't belong to you. And you won't stop what I'm doing here."

Lou smiled wickedly. "You do belong to me, and what's yours belongs to me."

"Like what?"

"Like that gorgeous young man you fancy."

"You leave him out of this."

"Too late." Lou glanced over toward the corner of the room.

Lisa gasped. "Chaz? What are you doing here?"

"Well, let's just say I've learned the error of my ways," Chaz said, a mocking smile on his face.

Lisa's eyes grew wide as he rose and went to the counter where Lou stood, placing his arms on either side of the older woman. His head dipped to plant a kiss on Lou's red painted mouth. Chaz looked back over his shoulder, smiling demonically.

Lisa backed away. "No. No, this can't be true. No. No." She turned and fled up the stairs, crying, screaming at the top of her lungs. "Noooooo."

She woke to Chaz's arms wrapped firmly around her as he rocked her back and forth.

"Shh, now, I've got you. It's a dream. It's only a dream."

Gasping, her eyes opened to peer at him. No satanic smiles, no trace of red lipstick. A dream. A horrible dream.

John made his way down the hall to Lisa's open door and peered in. "She's okay?"

Chaz looked over his shoulder at him and nodded. "Yeah, it was just a dream."

Lisa heard footsteps in the hall and then Jodi's voice. "Is everything okay?"

"Jodi, when I tell you to stay put, you'd better do it," came the heated reply.

"Don't you talk to me that way."

John drew a deep breath. "Sorry. Sorry, baby. I was still in Lieutenant mode." Heaving a sigh, he ran his hands over his face. "But when you know there's a possibility of danger, do you think it's wise to expose yourself to that?"

"Oh, come on now, John, I peeked out the bedroom door and saw you standing in Lisa's doorway. You didn't seem to be having to take any action."

"Really? Well, what would you say if, for example, I was standing here in the doorway because an intruder *inside* the room that *you* couldn't see had his gun pointed at my chest? Huh?"

Jodi tossed her straight, black hair over her shoulder and padded back to her room. "I'd say you were pretty dumb to get yourself into that kind of a situation."

John watched her go, not able to suppress the smile that crossed his face. He turned back to Chaz and Lisa, reaching in to grab the doorknob. "She's right," he said, still grinning. "I'll just close the door for you. Good night."

Chaz nodded at John before turning his attention to Lisa. "How we doing? Feeling any better?"

Lisa nodded. "Sorry. It was so real, especially at first."

"You wanna tell me about it?"

She shook her head. "Not really. Now that I'm thinking about it, it was just old fears surfacing. Old fears stemming from my cruddy childhood. Stupid stuff. The last part, it didn't seem too real, but it was the most hurtful."

"What hurt you so bad?"

"You."

"Me? I will never hurt you, Lisa. Not on purpose."

"In the dream, you betrayed me. With her."

"With her, who?"

"With my mother."

He started to make a crass joke, but realized this was a trauma for her that hadn't healed yet.

He kissed her nose. "I'm sure there's no reason for me to reassure you that it would never happen."

She smiled. "No, you don't have to reassure me. I told you it was just a silly dream."

He snuggled down into the bed with her, continuing to hold her tight. "Lisa, my love, would it bother you, or, would you mind if I gave you my take on a few things?"

She rubbed her cheek against his chest. "No, I don't mind."

"Okay, so, you had a rough go of it as a child. No real home. Constantly moving. No friends, and a witch for a mother who wouldn't even let you think of her as your mother. A childhood like that made you the strong person you are today, but it also might make you believe that you're all alone in the world. I want you to remember that there are people in your life now that you can depend on, family and friends yes, but mostly, me, because each day, I grow to love you more and more. I just wanted you to know."

"Chaz, you are a really good man," she sighed.

"I'm trying," he replied. "Let's pray away those nightmares."

"Let's do," Lisa said softly.

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"Good morning, Lisa," Grams chimed as she opened the door, carrying a breakfast tray. "I thought we'd have a little..."

She stopped as two heads poked up from under the quilt.

"Oh, my. I'm so sorry."

Chaz grinned, placing his hands behind his head against the headboard. "Good morning, Miss Maddie. Looks like you caught us red-handed."

"Shut up, Chaz. Grams," Lisa began. "I'm sorry. I had a nightmare last night, and Chaz came in to, uh, pray with me."

"Pray? Oh, sure you did."

Lisa's face turned red.

"I'm just teasing," Maddie added quickly. "I was gonna have a little private time with you, discuss some of our goals and so forth. No big deal. We'll do it another time." She turned to leave and then turned back, waving her hand at the couple. "Y'all just continue on– praying. It's good for the soul. I'll see you downstairs." She closed the door as she left.

Red-faced, Lisa leaned back against the pillow and blew out a breath. "That was embarrassing."

Chaz chuckled. "Well, you might not ever be able to convince her that nothing happened last night, but, I mean, we *were* praying!"

"Well, we WERE before we fell asleep," Lisa argued.

"Well, we might as well get in a few kisses as long as she thinks we've been intimate."

Lisa laughed. "Might as well."

Thirty minutes later Chaz and Lisa joined the others at the breakfast table. Chaz grinning, Lisa red-faced.

"So, what's on the agenda for today," Jodi asked. "Just one day before the big celebration, there must be something to be done."

"Well," Chaz began. "I gotta go take care of the horses, then, if Miss Maddie is through with us in the kitchen, I promised Joe we'd be into town to help him get his place ready and my dad needs a booth built for one of the charity organizations, and Mrs. Talbott needs one too and she needs help getting her goods out."

"She's just the sweetest little old lady," Maddie put in. "Must be close to ninety-five by now. She makes some beautiful quilts and dolls. They are simply amazing. We should buy some from her and carry them in a gift shop here. Oh, that would be great."

Lisa grinned. "I've turned Grams into a real entrepreneur, haven't I? You know what, Grams? You're absolutely right. Mrs. Talbott's work would probably be perfect for our gift shop. Jodi and I will check it out and we'll keep an eye out for some other crafts too."

"Nellie Berger makes wonderful silk flower arrangements and southern style wreaths and her sister Sally knits these adorable picture frames and scrap book covers."

"I'll keep those in mind," Jodi said with a smile.

"So, Grams, do you need any more help in the kitchen today?" Lisa asked.

"No, dear. I just have a few little odds and ends to do, and I want to gather a few baskets of tomatoes from the garden. I'll be fine. You kids run off and help out in town but don't forget to be at the Stewarts' house by seven."

Lisa turned to Chaz. "Your parents' house?"

Chaz shrugged sheepishly. "Oh, uh, yeah, uh, oops, I forgot to tell everyone. So, you're all invited to my parents' house for a pre-fourth dinner."

"Well, apparently, you didn't forget to tell Grams," Lisa fumed.

"She was here when my mom came by to do the inviting."

"Shame on you, Chaz," Maddie chided. "I'm sorry, Lisa. If I'd known I couldn't trust Chaz to tell you about the dinner, I would've made sure you knew."

"Well then, Miss Maddie," Chaz began. "I've disappointed you. What can I do to make it up to you?"

"Don't you worry, mister. I'll think of something."

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Psalm 118:24-25

"This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it.
Save us, we pray, O Lord!
O Lord, we pray, give us success!"

Chapter 17

Chaz pulled the black Ford Expedition up to the house. The front door opened and Lisa walked out onto the porch, tugging at the bodice of her yellow sundress. She straightened, pointed at herself and mouthed the words, "Do I look okay?"

He nodded emphatically and gave a thumbs up. She held one finger up and ran back inside. A few moments later Jodi and John appeared, headed toward the car. They piled into the backseat. "Where did Lisa go?" Chaz asked.

"She's on her third outfit," Jodi answered, shaking her head.

"Why? I told her it was casual. A swim party. By the way, did you bring your suits?"

"Got 'em right here," John said, patting the canvas bag he carried for Jodi.

Lisa appeared on the porch again, pointing to the outfit she wore, white slacks with a red tailored blouse and red sandals. He gave another thumbs up, but she frowned and disappeared again.

Chaz adjusted the AC in the car and got out. "I'll be right back."

"What's the big deal?" John asked Jodi.

"Think about it," Jodi answered. "Her boyfriend's parents, possible future in-laws, she's nervous."

John knew better than to argue.

Inside, Chaz knew the same thing. He took her in his arms. "Sweetheart, you look wonderful. Please don't worry so much."

She sighed. "They're gonna be watching me. Wanting to see just what kind of woman their son is dating."

"They've met you before."

"But that was only briefly and then it wasn't for certain that you and me were, you know, a couple. Now, it is for certain." She turned to him. "It is— right?"

He let her go. "Now you're just being silly."

She ignored him and pulled her hair back. "Maybe I should wear my hair up."

"Lisa."

She put her hands to her face. "I don't know where my confidence has gone."

"I do."

"Well, fill me in then," she said, staring blankly into the mirror.

He moved behind her, wrapping his arms around her waist and resting his chin on her shoulder. "This is all stemming from that dream last night. You never had the approval of your own mother. Now you're desperate for that approval. You don't have to worry, baby. My mother is so grateful to you for pulling me out of my funk, she'll worship you."

She sighed. "But look at all the trouble I've brought with me."

He frowned. "Lisa Lewis, you are not responsible for someone else's actions."

Sighing heavily she looked back at the mirror. "So, Chaz, do you like this outfit?"

"Sure."

"Sure? What does that mean?"

"Um, I mean it's just fine, hon."

"Just fine? Oh, I can't wear something that's just fine. What's wrong with it?"

Chaz knew he'd messed up and wasn't sure what to say next. "Um, nothing really."

"Nothing, really? Well, that sounds more like something to me."

He swallowed hard. "Lisa, you look great. It's just so... "

"So what?"

"So, businesslike."

She looked herself over. "But it's nice and modest, right?"

"It doesn't matter how modest it is, Lisa. You're gonna be in a bathing suit after dinner anyway."

"Maybe not."

Enough is enough. "Lisa, stop it. Wear what you want and bring your bathing suit. We'll be waiting in the car. You wanna make a bad impression? Try being late to my mother's dinner party."

Five minutes later Lisa climbed into the passenger side of the SUV. She wore the original yellow sun dress and had her hair pulled back in a clip at the base of her neck. "Okay, so, sorry, everyone. I had a little meltdown."

"Don't you worry about it, sweetie," Jodi said. "It happens."

The four of them arrived at the Stewarts' just a few minutes past

the appointed time.

"What time did Grams come over?" Lisa asked.

"Mom came to pick her up about four. She wanted to spend some time with her, talk her into a little check up."

"Oh, that's good. Your mom is a very nice lady."

"Yeah, she is."

They walked into a quiet, dark, house. "That's strange," Chaz said in a loud voice. He led them to a room just off the front foyer, ushered Lisa inside the room, leaned in and flicked the light switch.

"Surprise!"

Lisa gasped. "What?" The sign hanging over head read "Welcome Home Lisa!"

She turned to Chaz. "You knew?"

He smiled. "Of course."

She looked back over her shoulder to John and Jodi who were smiling. "You too?"

Jodi shrugged. "Sorry. I was sworn to secrecy."

Patricia Stewart came forward, her arms outstretched, her smile kind. "Lisa, please don't be angry with us. I just had to do something to welcome our long-lost little neighbor back into the fold." She took Lisa's hands in hers. "If you only knew how often Miss Maddie spoke of you. It seems we've all known you forever. We truly are happy you've come back to stay right here in our little town of Pine Forest."

"Thank you, Mrs. Stewart," Lisa said. She looked around realizing her father was present, and Shirley and Megan. Grams stood by a table laden with food, a smile on her face, a tear in her eye. Chaz's sisters stood nearby, chatting with each other and Tyson and his father held up a drink in her honor. Chaz's friends were here too. Troy waved at her. He had a beautiful girl on his arm. Evan and Josh nodded at her. They all began coming forward then, to hug Lisa and to meet John and Jodi.

Once the initial shock was over and everyone had downed a drink or two they all sat down to a delicious dinner of salad, roast beef and new potatoes along with a myriad of other dishes. It was obvious that Maddie had a hand in the cooking as she directed the placement of food on a buffet. Dinner conversation was easy and laughter abounded. No one saw fit to bring up the unpleasant by mentioning the attacks on Lisa, or by asking questions about Louise Lewis. No one mentioned Chaz's former life. They did however, ask a lot of questions about the coming Inn and about the role the Stewart ranch would play.

Lisa was on her best behavior, making sure she didn't accidentally let her language slip, taking small bites, using her napkin, laughing at all the right places. It was tedious work. She didn't know what else to do. She'd had to perform for her mother. She continued to perform now.

She began to wonder if she was a real person at all. Did she always do everything in her life to gain some kind of approval? Would she continue to do that for the rest of her life? She looked around the table. She truly cared about everyone here. Her wonderful father who hadn't given up trying to find her. Her stepmother who accepted her completely as a long, lost daughter. Megan, whose large heart took her in immediately as a big sister. Chaz's friends who'd been nothing but accepting of her. And Chaz's family who acted as if the sun rose and set just for her.

"Lisa," Cindy began, interrupting Lisa's soul searching. "I don't think you've met my little sister yet. This is Stephanie," she said, knocking her little sister in the shoulder. "We call her Stephie. You can call her anything you want."

Lisa laughed. "Hi Stephie," she said. "You're the one that's still in school?"

Stephie nodded. "I'll be a senior this August, thank goodness."

"Know where you're gonna go to college?"

"Yeah, looks like I'm probably gonna join the ranks up at Georgia. Not completely sure yet."

"It's a hard decision," Lisa agreed.

"So," Cindy butted in. "We all want to take Jodi shopping next week. You know, show her around, help her find her way around out here in the boonies. Wanna come?"

"We all?"

"Me, Steph, Megan, you and Jodi."

"That sounds like a blast. I'd love to come. I haven't seen much of Megan since I've been here and I'd like a chance to spend the day with my new sis."

"Megan's been indisposed," Cindy said with a grin toward the frowning girl.

Lisa looked toward Megan, a question on her face.

Megan shrugged. "Oh, well, I didn't tell anyone, but— I've been seeing a guy."

"Oh! So, did you bring him?"

"No. We broke up a few days ago."

"Oh, Megan, I'm so sorry. I know how hard these things can be."

"It wasn't soon enough for me," Joe added, earning an elbow in the ribs from Shirley.

"Daaddy," Megan whined.

"Sorry, sweetheart. That was insensitive of me."

Charles senior laughed out loud at that. "You don't sound very sorry to me, Joe."

"That's because I'm not," Joe laughed.

Lisa smiled outwardly, while secretly feeling the alienation bestowed on her by her mother. She'd never had a father to approve or disapprove of a boyfriend. She intended to let Megan know just how lucky she was.

They adjourned to the pool and patio where dessert and drinks would be served. Cindy and Stephie were the first to change into their bathing suits. They were also the first to be thrown into the water. Jodi and John were right behind along with Megan and Tyson. Soon, the only young ones left sitting with Maddie, Charles and Patricia Stewart, and Joe and Shirley Carter were Chaz and Lisa.

"It was a wonderful meal," Lisa said.

"Thank you," Patricia Stewart answered. "Maddie had a lot to do with that. She's a gem."

"Yes she is. I'm so happy I've been able to come home and get to know her."

"And I'm happy you came," Maddie assured her. "I can't remember what I used to do with my time before you came home."

"She certainly seems to be a sweet child, Maddie," Patricia said. "And to come here and come up with all the wonderful ideas for the Inn, I am just so impressed."

Lisa rose. "I, uh, I think I'll go put on my suit and take a swim."

Chaz stood. "Mom, Miss Maddie, great food. Thanks." He took Lisa's hand and escorted her into the house.

"They make a lovely couple, don't they?" Patricia asked softly.

"They do, but don't pressure them, Sugar," Charles said.

Patricia smiled. "I wouldn't dare."

Chaz and Lisa emerged a few minutes later. Lisa wore a wraparound skirt over her lime green bikini. She'd taken her hair down from the clip and it fell loosely over her shoulders to just inches above her waist. In the exotic outfit she was breathtaking. When she removed

the skirt, every male present was affected in some way.

Lisa dove into the water and swam gracefully across the pool.

It wasn't long before a rough game of chicken broke out and it was only a short time after that Cindy, sitting on Josh's shoulders, found Lisa's hair was her weakness. It proved to be the perfect tool to unseat her from Chaz's shoulders. The others, capitalizing on Jodi being shy as a newcomer, made sure she and John were next to go. Defeated, Jodi and John sat on the edge of the pool. Chaz and Lisa took chairs near the edge to cheer on their competition.

"Get Cindy, get Cindy," Lisa yelled at Megan.

Megan reached for Cindy from atop Tyson's shoulders. Stephie, riding Evan teamed up with Megan against her sister. Troy's date tried to blind side Megan while she had her attention on Cindy.

Chaz wasn't sure when his perspective began to change. He supposed it was the moment Cindy and Josh went under. Her head smacked the side of the pool. He'd come up out of his chair— he remembered that much. And the blood. He remembered the blood. That was the last thing he remembered before he became aware of his current surroundings.

He was in a pool side lounge chair. The pool was empty. Lisa was behind him, her hands resting on his shoulders. Beside him, John sat in a chair, his hands on his knees. His voice was clear and strong as he spoke. "Speak to me, Chaz. Come on buddy. Everyone is safe."

Chaz blinked as his head cleared. "Where's Jul... I mean, Cindy. Is she okay?" Abruptly, he tried to stand but John held him in place.

"Cindy's fine. Your mom's taking care of her," John said, looking him over as he spoke. "How about you? You feeling all right?"

Chaz shook his head. "Dizzy. My head is pounding." He looked up at Lisa. "What happened?"

"Cindy got hurt and you went in after her. We couldn't get you to let her go. You kept calling her Julie. Once Tyson got you to put her down, you were like, in a daze. Your dad and John got you out of the pool and over to this chair. John asked everyone to give him a chance to speak to you."

"And they agreed?" Chaz asked, surprise in his voice.

"Well," John said with a grin. "I was pretty convincing. I gave them my credentials."

"Which are?"

"I'm a member of the *National Alliance for Emotional Health*, a

meridian energy therapist, a trauma counselor, and a master EFT practitioner. I've got thousands of hours under my belt working with war veterans for post-traumatic stress disorder. I convinced your parents that I could help you."

"Oh dear Jesus." Chaz buried his face in his hands. "I went out in front of everyone?"

"Chaz, I'm sure everyone that's here knows what happened and knows you've had a difficult time coping."

"Yeah. Well, I just had to go and demonstrate, didn't I?"

"Don't be embarrassed. What everyone else thinks isn't the issue right now," John said sternly.

"Tell me, what is the issue, Doc," Chaz said sarcastically. "And what is an EEG whatever you said?"

"EFT practitioner. EFT stands for emotional freedom technique. You see, there have been discoveries regarding the body's energy system and its alignment. Those discoveries have proven successful in thousands of clinical cases. EFT can be applied to many emotional and health issues and it often works where nothing else will."

"Sounds like a bunch of hocus pocus."

John nodded. "Yeah, it does, doesn't it? But it's not. I can get you the reports. EFT has provided thousands of people with relief from pain, diseases and emotional issues. It's like an emotional version of acupuncture except needles aren't necessary. Instead, you stimulate well-established energy meridian points on your body by tapping on them with your fingertips. The process is easy and is based on the theory that the cause of many negative emotions is a disruption in the body's energy system."

"And my mother let you near me?"

"She's actually heard of it. She was the one who told your dad that there is a group of about eighteen medical doctors on the advisory board and that there is actually quite a bit of EFT work being done in VA hospitals to help vets with post-traumatic stress disorders. She said she'd actually been looking into it as a means to help you and that she'd take it as a good sign that an EFT practitioner happened to come into your life."

"My mom said that?"

"It appears she's very open-minded and willing to do anything to help you."

"So, this EFT stuff is what you meant when you said you could

help me?"

"It helped me, and I've personally seen it help hundreds of others. And read case studies on thousands more. I'm pretty sure I can help you. If you'll let me. "It may also help you get more out of professional counseling sessions."

Chaz glanced up at Lisa, then back to John. "I want a normal life. I'll go along with anything at this point. So what do I have to do?"

John smiled. "It's sort of like acupressure. It involves tapping on certain energy points on your body, like the top of your head, above your eyebrow, I'll show you all of them."

"When?"

"As Master Kino liked to say, now is always a good time."

Chaz nodded. "Why did I know you were gonna say that," he said with a smile.

John looked up at Lisa.

"I'll, um, make myself scarce," she volunteered, leaning down to plant a kiss on Chaz's lips."

"We won't be long," John assured her. He began explaining to Chaz the energy points on the body and the simple yet effective procedure of tapping them and getting them to synchronize.

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Lisa snuggled up close to Chaz. "I'm amazed at the way you make me feel."

"And how is that?"

"It's too hard to put into words."

"Let's try. One word. Just give me one word," he demanded.

She sighed. "Beautiful. You make me feel beautiful."

"You are beautiful, I have nothing to do with it. Try again."

"But I never felt beautiful. Not really. Not until you."

"Try again," he insisted.

"Okay. How about important, that's a better one. You make me feel like I'm somebody who's important, someone who counts. And smart. You actually listen to me when I speak as if what I have to say may be of worth. And accepted. Wanted. Safe. Loved." She turned to him and softly kissed his lower lip. "When you tell me you love me, I'm almost in awe. Chaz Stewart loves *me*."

"Lisa," he sighed. "I do love you. Everything about you. I'm not sure how it could happen so quickly, I just know that I can't stop thinking about you. I can't stop wanting you. But I'm also afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Afraid of loving someone and losing them, again."

"You won't lose me."

Chaz sighed. "There are no guarantees, Lisa. That's a lesson I've learned well."

"What are you trying to tell me?" she asked.

"Nothing. Only that I love you. I've spent enough time living in the past. I'm not a coward, at least I don't think I am. I'm brave enough to see what I want and to go for it. And you, babe, are what I want. Every last red-headed, green-eyed, dirty-worded, sweet, vulnerable part of you."

She rubbed her nose against his. "Do you feel better? I mean, since you and John had that little session?"

He gave a slight smile. "I think I do, actually. John and I, we'll work together a few more times. I can work on it alone too. I feel, what, I guess I feel more in control."

"I'm glad he's been able to help. It's almost like it was meant to be, him coming here and just happening to have the skills to help."

"It's like our prayers are being answered. Like God is showing us just how real He is. I don't think it was a coincidence that you got involved with a bunch of my killer cows, or that loving you started my healing, or that you brought your assistant here to live, an assistant you only knew for three days, or that her husband is a PTSD specialist. God is amazing and you coming here *was* meant to be."

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Lisa, Jodi and John waved at Chaz as he pranced by on Beebe. Chaz pulled back on the reins and Beebe reared up, pawing at the air in magnificent splendor. Lisa laughed and clapped her hands in delight. Tyson and his dad waved as they brought up the rear of the small group of the *Pine County Horsemen's Association*.

"Are you having fun?" Lisa asked Jodi.

Jodi looked up from the lens of her camera. "A blast. I know we all live in the same country, but small-town America is so much different from California."

"Different," Lisa agreed, "but great. The people I've met, the love in their hearts, the feeling of unity and family and a place where they belong. It's wonderful."

"I agree," John said. "And it's what we fought for, what we kept in our minds when I was in Iraq and Afghanistan. Home."

The next high school band started up, drums pounding, trombonists swinging as they played their fight song. Lisa and Jodi clapped to the rhythm. The parade was not the elaborate doings that they'd seen in California, but for some reason, it was much more enjoyable. The city of Macon, Georgia was very small compared to Atlanta and tiny compared to Los Angeles and the parade was shorter than a big city parade. It ended much too soon for Lisa's liking, but she looked forward to the rest of the day which would take place in *Pine Forest.*

By eleven the entire town of Pine Forest was turned into a giant fairground. Amusement rides filled the grocery store parking lot. Every business in town had a booth out in the municipal complex. Joe's had tables adorned with U.S. flag centerpieces set up outside and along the walk. There were huge barbeque grills all claiming to have the world's best. Rows of stands lined with red, white and blue bunting, held every July 4th delicacy one could think of, from watermelon to cotton candy, homemade ice cream being scooped straight from the churns, hotdogs, hamburgers, beer, soda, pies, cakes, fried chicken, potato salad. Craft booths were enough to stock a mall. T-shirts for sale, funny hats, bumper stickers, puppies, you name it. Live bands played music from a grandstand in the center of the complex. Flags lined the street.

A tricycle race had parents yelling and screaming as their toddlers tried to beat each other to the finish line. Next would be a three-legged race, then sack races, potato races, tug-of-war. Chaz and John tried to show off throwing baseballs to knock milk bottles down but were beaten out by one of the local high school kids.

"There's so many people here," Jodi said. "I wouldn't have thought there were so many in this town."

"There's not. We attract people from all over the middle Georgia area. We're sort of famous for our Independence Day celebrations," Chaz answered.

John nodded. "I can understand why. This is truly awesome. I'm lovin' it."

"Oh, look, Lisa," Jodi cried as they came upon a booth brimming with delightfully ornate women's hats and bonnets.

After fifteen minutes at the hat booth, Chaz rolled his eyes. "Why don't John and I go get a beer at Joe's while you try on hats."

"Okay," Lisa said, picking up a hat covered with parrots and placing it on her head. "Grams is over there helping out with the food.

Tell her I'll be there shortly."

"You got it."

John pulled Jodi close and kissed her softly, giving her tummy a pat before he sauntered away.

Not wanting to be outdone, Chaz took Lisa in his arms and laid one on, leaving her swaying in a daze.

Jodi giggled as the men took their leave.

Chaz and John were on their second beer when a kid no older than ten approached.

"You John?" the kid asked.

John smiled at him. "Yep. And who are you?"

The kid didn't bother to answer. "That Chinese lookin' lady sent me to get you. She said she's not feeling good. She said for you to come down to the school."

"Chinese lady? You mean Jodi?"

The boy nodded. "I guess so."

"The school?" Chaz asked. "What are they doing down there?"

"Look, mister. I dunno. They said somethin' bout needin' shade."

The kid took off as John stood. "Where's the school?"

"Elementary school is down past Joe's at the end of the street."

"I don't understand why she wouldn't just stay where she was and send for me. I knew I should've argued when they said they wanted to leave their purses in the trunk of the car so they wouldn't have to lug them around. I don't like Jodi not having her cell phone with her. I don't know why she didn't want to keep it on her."

"I'm sure she's fine. Maybe they got far enough down the street while they were shopping and decided the school was a good place to rest in the shade. There's a huge oak tree beside the school that every kid who's ever lived here has climbed. Come on."

They hurried down the street toward the school but when they arrived there was no one in sight. Chaz circled under the giant oak, hands on hips, trying to figure out what Lisa and Jodi had been thinking. John looked up quickly as they heard voices coming from behind the school. "Back there," John said.

When the two men rounded the corner of the building they were surprised to find, not Jodi and Lisa, but four men, who looked like poster boys for a typical bad boy motorcycle gang.

Chaz's mouth pressed into a thin line. He looked back at John who only nodded at him. Four more men stepped out behind John. John

would've known even if he hadn't seen Chaz's eyes widen.

Chaz mumbled a curse.

"You ain't kiddin'." The words were spoken by a guy with a black bandana covering his head.

Chaz put on his friendliest smile. "You guys seen a couple of ladies hangin' around?"

"Just the two of you," the same guy answered as his buddies snickered.

Chaz frowned, facing the obvious. It was no accident they'd arrived here to find a gang of bikers. "So, I guess there's no way of talking our way out of this, huh, fellas," he said.

"Guess not," the leader answered.

"How much they pay you?" Chaz asked.

"It ain't the money, man," the guy next to the leader answered sarcastically. "It's the pleasure of kickin' some rich guy's..."

"Rich? You got me mixed up with someone else."

"Nope. I'm pretty sure you're the one," the guy answered, causing the others to laugh.

Chaz eyed the man. Big. Ugly. Tattooed. It would take a lot to bring him down. John would be his only hope there. Actually, John would be his only hope at all. He'd been awfully quiet. Chaz glanced back at him. John's eyes were narrowed, his expression unreadable, his body deceptively relaxed.

"So, uh, whaddya think, John?" Chaz asked.

John's voice was soft and deadly. "I'm thinkin' I hope I don't have to kill somebody today, it bein' a national holiday and all."

Chaz cursed again, knowing the comment would bring on the inevitable. He turned back just in time to dodge the fist coming toward his nose.

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"That's funny," Jodi said to Lisa. "That kid did say down at the corner by the Texaco station didn't he?"

Lisa nodded. "It'd be kinda hard to mistake Texaco station for anything else."

"And this is the only one in town, right?"

"I think so," Lisa said, wishing she had her cell phone. "Let me go ask again." She went inside the convenience store and approached the clerk. "Are you positive that Chaz Stewart and another guy that looks a lot like him didn't come in here?"

The older woman smiled. "I'm absolutely positive, honey. I'm the only one on duty until three when my husband is gonna relieve me so I can go have some fun too and I wouldn't miss someone as cute as Chaz."

Lisa smiled. "No, neither would I."

"So, he said he'd meet you here?"

"Yes. I was told he had a surprise for us. For my friend and I," Lisa added, motioning outside toward Jodi.

"Maybe he was detained."

"Maybe. Well, thanks anyway."

Lisa had just joined Jodi outside when she thought she heard Chaz call her name. The voice came from around the back of the building and both women turned toward it.

"Well, I wonder what they've got going on," Lisa said with a laugh as she and Jodi walked over rocks and around bushes to get to the back of the gas station.

She was still wondering when the steely hand slapped over her mouth. She fought, but still, within seconds the man had her gagged and tied to the closest pine tree. She could hear Jodi start to scream and then a muffled cry. *Oh, please don't hurt Jodi. Oh, God, please protect her baby.* Tears stung Lisa's eyes as she tried to focus on what was happening.

A man held Jodi from behind. Lisa couldn't make out anything about him except he was thin and black. Blood poured from a cut on Jodi's lip. However, she appeared to be smiling, Lisa thought, her brow furrowing. Jodi faced another man. Lisa didn't know this one either. He was white, with short dark hair and a small goatee.

"Come and get me, if you think you're man enough," Jodi said.

Lisa held her breath as the man sauntered forward, reached up to grab Jodi's shirt and ripped it open with one violent jerk.

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1 Corinthians 15:33-34

"Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character.' Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame."

Chapter 18

Chaz spit blood as he stood again. The guy he'd just knocked down struggled to stand, while at the same time, another thug swung at Chaz with a short stick. He blocked it with his forearm but the pain reverberated to the very core of his being. Fury from the pain gave him the strength to drive his fist into the flab of the guy's midsection. When the man doubled over Chaz delivered a swift uppercut and the man went down hard. Chaz staggered back, trying to catch his breath. Fighting in a brawl was nothing like you might see in the movies. There was nothing heroic and romantic about it at all. He was in pain, he was tired and he still wasn't sure if he would live through it.

He turned just in time to see John deliver a spinning back kick to the face of the big, ugly dude who'd spoken earlier. He went down hard and didn't look like he'd be getting up any time soon. Chaz drew a relieved breath. He and John fell into the same back to back stance they'd begun in. Even though several bad guys were down it was still four to two. Chaz wiped the sweat from his eyes and drew several large gulps of air.

"You doin' okay, buddy?" John asked.

"Holdin' my own, I guess."

"Stay strong. We're about done here."

That brought on the charge. A bad guy came screaming in from the side and plowed Chaz down like any good linebacker would do. They tumbled over hardened clay dirt, each trying to stay on top.

In the meantime John was doing his best to put the other three down without being lethal. One guy went down when John accidentally connected with his throat. That distracted John enough to allow another to grab him from behind. Using the one who held him as leverage he kicked out, connecting with the head of the one coming at him. And they were down to two; the guy who had hold of him and the guy rolling around on the ground with Chaz.

John breathed a sigh of relief. He could handle two. He easily flipped the bad guy off his back, planted a foot in his abdomen and ground it in. The guy rolled over and began to vomit. John turned his attention to Chaz. He was on top at the moment, swinging away at the guy's face. John nodded his approval as he staggered toward the action. They needed to get this over with.

He heard the roar of motorcycle engines come to life and realized

some of the bad guys were taking off, leaving their friends behind who couldn't get themselves up. John moved toward Chaz and tapped him on the shoulder. Chaz looked up.

"Come on, man. It's over."

Chaz looked down at the one he'd been pounding on. Realizing the man was out, he reached out a hand to John who helped pull him to his feet.

They stood breathing heavily, giving their brains a moment to put two and two together.

"The girls," Chaz said.

They took off.

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Lisa struggled to free herself, terrified of what she thought was about to happen to Jodi, however, apparently, Jodi had a different plan. As her attacker moved in, Jodi's foot connected with his knee, pressing it back into a hyper-extension. The man fell to the ground, crying out in pain. Next Jodi's heel stomped on the instep of the man who held her. He grunted, instinctively shoving her away from him. She spun and kicked him in the head. He stumbled away from the feral female, grabbed his friend by the shirt and took off.

With trembling fingers Jodi worked on freeing Lisa from her bonds. Once the task was accomplished they fell into each other's arms, crying.

"Oh, Jodi, I was so afraid for you."

Jodi wiped at the tears that fell. "I was too. For both of us. I can't believe they gave up so easily."

"You were awesome," Lisa blubbered.

"Yeah, well, don't tell John how I fell apart afterwards," she laughed through her tears.

Lisa laughed too. "Our secret. Come on, let's go find the guys."

Arms around each other they stumbled out from behind the store and ran head on into the two men they'd just been talking about.

"Jodi! John! Chaz! Lisa!" All names were said at the same time.

The women fell against their respective men. There were a few whimpers by the females as strong arms were wrapped around them, and sighs of relief by the men as they held the person most dear to them in the whole world.

Lisa looked up at Chaz. "What happened to you?"

He rubbed his jaw. "We were detained."

Jodi and Lisa both laughed.

"And what's so funny about that?" Chaz asked.

"The store clerk said that's probably what happened to you. Only I think her version of detained and yours is a little different."

John tugged at Jodi's ripped shirt. "So, I'm gonna have to kill someone after all, aren't I?"

"You should've seen her, John," Lisa said. "She kicked those two guys' butts. She was awesome."

"Two guys? Are you okay, baby?" John asked.

"I'm fine." She gestured toward Lisa. "We're fine."

"Looks like they connected," he said, touching her swollen lip.

"Just the one time," she said with a grin. "Looks like you've been connected with yourself."

"And it was a lot more than once," Chaz offered.

"Speak for yourself," John said.

"How did you find us here?" Lisa asked.

"Grabbed that little kid by the scruff of the neck and shook the information out of him."

"So what happened?" Jodi asked. "And why?"

"Someone paid a motorcycle gang to take us out, apparently so they could get to the two of you," Chaz answered.

"For the same reason, right? To get me to leave town," Lisa said, her voice shaking. "Except this time they went after Jodi."

"They know you won't leave, so they decided to work on someone you care about," John stated matter-of-factly.

"What are we gonna do, Chaz?" Lisa asked. "This is making me crazy. They went after Jodi."

"Calm down now, hon. We're gonna call Tyson, let him know and then let the rest of the family know. I don't want Megan or Cindy or Steph to be out alone."

⌂⌂⌂

Lisa sat on the quilt between Chaz's legs, her head resting against his chest. They gazed toward the sky. It wasn't quite dark enough for the fireworks to start but they were comfortable and had no desire to do anything else but sit close and enjoy just being. Chaz sipped on a beer, feeling the beginnings of a good buzz.

John and Jodi opted to go for a swim. The entire town converged on Wilson's Lake where the fireworks display would be held. There were bonfires and coolers filled with refreshments. The older generations brought folding chairs and sat in circles and talked about life. The younger generations played pickup games of football or

frisbee or went for a swim. And the lovers found places to be alone so that lips could meet.

Chaz considered him and Lisa to be of that last group. Only he was having a tough time getting close enough without causing himself a great deal of pain. When Lisa scooted back to be closer to him he grunted.

"Oh, Chaz, I'm sorry," Lisa said, turning to him. "Let me see how bad it is."

She tried to tug his shirt up but he stopped her. "No. I don't want to know."

"I do."

"Why?"

"So I can give you sympathy."

He sighed, downed the rest of his beer and leaned over to pull another from the cooler. "I don't want your sympathy."

She smiled slyly. "Let me look under your shirt and I'll let you look under mine."

Tilting the bottle up, he smiled at her. How could he turn that down? "Deal."

She lifted the hem of his shirt and pulled it over his head. She gasped. "Good grief, Chaz. You're covered with bruises. You look like you've been in a car wreck."

"I feel like I have." He raised his arm. "Look at this one."

Lisa ran her fingers gently over his forearm. The entire length was a deep purple. "Oh, honey," she whispered as she leaned forward and softly kissed his arm.

"And, and, take a look at this one on my neck. Some guy tried to strangle me."

She touched her lips to his neck.

"And this one," he said, pointing to his abdomen.

She smiled. "I don't see anything there."

He looked down. "Are you blind? It's right there."

She gave in and kissed him where he pointed. He closed his eyes wishing with all his might that they were somewhere behind closed doors. Then he remembered, he was supposed to be proving himself worthy of God's presence in his life. Apparently he'd had one too many beers, because he was feeling pretty uninhibited.

"Your turn," Lisa whispered as she grabbed the hem of her shirt.

He laid his hand over hers to stop her. "We'd better stop. We're in public."

"No one can see us way over here in the dark."

"Lisa, don't."

"Don't what?" she asked coyly.

The sweat beaded on his lip, his eyes closed, his breathing became labored. He reached down and grabbed her hand. "Stop."

She giggled. "Okay. I'll behave."

His heartbeat slowed. "Come here and let me kiss that sweet mouth of yours," he said softly.

She moved closer and tilted her head up. Just as their lips met, the sky burst into stars of red, white and blue.

"Oh, Jesus, You are good," Chaz whispered in prayer.

They couldn't help but laugh out loud.

⌂⌂⌂

Chaz woke later than usual. He opened one eye to glance at the clock. Smiling, he snuggled back down into the softness of the bed. He had at least another hour he could sleep. He'd had a few too many last night, but what the heck, it had been Independence Day. Nothing that a few aspirin couldn't handle. This, is heaven, he thought. It could only be better if Lisa were here now, married to him, in his bed.

"Chaz!" Lisa screamed. "Oh no, Chaz!"

He sprang from the bed, raced down the steps. Got to the kitchen and stopped.

Lisa looked up at him, tears streaming down her face. Maddie lay on the kitchen floor, her skin gray.

Chaz threw himself down beside her. Started CPR immediately. "Call mom. Get her here," he barked. "Then call 911."

Hands shaking, Lisa grabbed the phone as John and Jodi came charging down the steps.

"John, I need your help," he ordered. "Breathe two breaths when I tell you to."

Chaz pumped Maddie's heart. "Okay, breathe." He waited for John to finish then began pumping again, counting to thirty. "Breathe."

The men continued administering CPR. Lisa cried and prayed alternately. Jodi watched and waited. When she heard tires on the gravel drive out front she ran to the door. Dr. Stewart hurried inside. What seemed like only a few minutes later the ambulance arrived. Through a whirlwind of activity Lisa managed to keep it together. Jodi urged Lisa upstairs to get dressed, then John stayed home with Jodi while Chaz drove Lisa to the hospital. Then, after a stop at the local hospital for an assessment, Dr. Stewart arranged to have Maddie taken

into Atlanta to Piedmont Hospital. Chaz and Lisa followed.

"I can't stand this," Lisa cried after an hour in the waiting room. "Please, Chaz, can you find out something? Anything."

"I'll try. I'll be right back."

Lisa watched him go. She was being unfair, she knew. It didn't matter to the nurses if Chaz was Dr. Stewart's son. They weren't gonna let him in, but still, maybe they'd tell him something. She turned as someone called her name. Her father strode toward her. She ran to him.

"Oh, Daddy," she cried.

His arms came around her. "There now, little girl. Maddie's gonna be just fine. You wait and see."

She lifted her head. "But how do you know?"

"I just do. I feel it. Trust me. She's too happy to have you back to leave us now."

"It's her heart, Daddy. She seemed so fine. So healthy. Dr. Stewart said her heart failed. How can she be okay one minute and then the next..."

"I don't know baby. I just feel like she's gonna be okay."

"I hope you're right. Please be right."

Chaz came back, offered his hand to Joe.

"Did you find out anything?" Lisa asked.

"Yes. She's still alive. Her heart did fail. They don't know why but they've been able to get her stabilized."

"Oh, thank you God," Lisa cried.

"See there, little girl," Joe said.

Lisa collapsed onto a hard plastic chair, buried her face in her hands and cried.

Chaz knelt down beside her and held her until she quieted.

Finally Lisa looked up. "Can I see her?"

"Not yet. They're gonna be moving her to ICU and then you'll be able to go in."

Lisa nodded.

Joe took Chaz aside to ask him about what had transpired and filled him in on what the Sheriff had to report about the men who attacked Lisa and Jodi the day before, which was pretty much squat.

Chaz ran a hand through his hair, a sign of frustration. "Something's got to give. This is ridiculous. We should be able to pin this thing down. Someone wants Lisa gone. Every instinct I have says Marcus is involved in what's happening. The motorcycle gang that tried to kill us yesterday was not a figment of my imagination."

"No, no I can see from the black eye and the bruises on your arms that it was real, Chaz, but not one bike was traced. Not one license plate. Nothing."

Chaz sighed, hands on hips. "Okay, so, I'm just gonna concentrate on keeping Lisa safe and getting Miss Maddie well."

"Good. That's all we can do right now. I'm gonna stick around for a few hours, see if I can talk Lisa into eating something. Then I've got to go, but Shirley is coming up to help keep vigil in a little while."

Chaz nodded. "Appreciate it."

"That's what family is for."

"Tell that to Lisa."

⌂⌂⌂

"I don't get it, Marcus. Why is the stupid land so important to you? Who cares about that stupid old farmhouse? I know I don't."

"Andrea," Marcus said softly and patiently. "Land is all there is. It's the most important thing. There is a finite amount of land on this earth. No more is going to magically appear. What's here is here and what's mine is mine. And I intend to make that land mine. Within the next ten years it's gonna be worth a fortune."

"But I liked Miss Maddie. She was always so nice to me. Why'd you have to go and kill her?"

"I didn't want to do it, Andrea." He came to her where she sat on her vanity stool and peered at her adorable oval face in the mirror. "Sometimes a man has to do things that he doesn't want to do." He placed his hand on her shoulder. "You understand, don't you, sweetheart?"

She looked up at him in the mirror and gave him the gift of a slight smile. "I'm trying to understand. Really I am. I just wish you'd gotten rid of that red-headed witch instead of Miss Maddie."

"Look, Andrea, I promised I would and don't I always keep my promises? Believe me, I want her gone as much as you. I had everything under control until she got here." He sighed. "I really didn't think she'd hold on this long. I believed she'd turn tail and run at the first sign of trouble. Now I have to try and figure out a way of permanently getting rid of her and that takes some planning, Andrea. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Yes," she sighed. "But I'm tired of waiting. She's in the way. As long as she's around, Chaz won't even look at me."

Abruptly, Marcus pulled his hand away. "What you see in that overgrown cowboy is beyond me. It's him I *should* be gettin' rid of.

Why couldn't he have gotten himself blown up in Iraq by some roadside bomb?"

Andrea rose. "Come on now, Marcus, don't be jealous. You know I like you best, but no one can know about us. I need someone to be with in public and I want him."

"Yes, well, sometimes there are things you can't have."

Her face filled with rage. "Don't you tell me that. Don't you dare tell me that. I can have him. And I will have him. After everything that's happened I just know that we'll be able to work it out."

"I hate him, Andrea. He accused me all those years ago of going after Cindy and he's used his fists on me on more than one occasion. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

She looked up at her brother, the pulse beating in his neck, the look of hatred in his eyes. She reached up and touched his face gently, knowing her touch could calm him. "Of course it does. Admit it, though, you did try to get Cindy. If I hadn't come along you would've done it. You were lucky that time."

"Maybe."

"If I hadn't stopped you, they would've put you in jail and then where would I be? Huh? Come on now, Marcus. Promise me you won't hurt him again. Those bikers could've killed him. If that had happened I would never forgive you. Never."

He looked down at her. "Don't say that."

"I'm sorry, but you need to keep that in mind. Chaz lives. The redhead dies."

He pushed her away. "I have to think about it."

She giggled. "Don't think. Just get her out of my town and out of my life."

"I already said I will," he answered, pouting.

"Oh, stop looking so upset," she said. "Come here and I'll make everything all better. It's the least I can do after all you've done for me. And all you're about to do."

Marcus let her take the lead. He liked it when she took control, when he could stop thinking for a little while. He always had to be the strong one. He'd had to take care of her didn't he? She was so young and innocent. Many years ago, she'd asked him to show her the things that would make her a woman. At first he hadn't wanted to. It was wrong. He knew that's how the outside world saw it, but they couldn't understand how much he cared for her, how he'd do anything for her.

He looked up at her sweet face as she cradled his head and

murmured endearments in his ear. He smiled at her.

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Shirley, Lisa and Chaz rose as Dr. Stewart entered the room in ICU. Maddie had still not opened her eyes, but she was stable. Patricia Stewart gave Lisa a hug.

"Anything new since yesterday, Mom?" Chaz asked.

"Yes and that's why I'm here." She sighed heavily. "I've just gotten off the phone with the Sheriff."

"The Sheriff? Why? Did you find out who hurt Lisa?"

"No, but what I did find out is very upsetting." She took a deep breath. "Maddie was poisoned."

Lisa gasped. "Poisoned?"

"Barium carbonate."

"Barium carbonate?" Chaz asked, searching his brain for the chemical breakdowns.

"You can find it commonly in rat poison."

"Rat poison. Dear God," Chaz mumbled.

"It's my fault," Lisa said softly, peering down at Maddie's face. "I should have left." She looked up at Chaz. "I should have left. I have no business coming here and bringing all this trouble with me."

"You didn't bring it with you, Lisa. Do you think someone followed you here from California and decided to kill us all off?"

"Someone did follow me. Glen. And he poisoned me, didn't he? Maybe he did this too. Do you think he did this?"

"No. I don't. First, Glen didn't poison you, he drugged you. I think someone who lives in *Pine Forest* doesn't like having strangers come in and take over their town."

"Then I need to go," Lisa said softly. "I'll leave. I'll just leave. Then everyone will be okay."

"You're not going anywhere," Chaz said.

She turned on him. "Don't you tell me what I can and can't do."

He shook his head. "Come on, Lisa. Don't fall apart on me now." He looked over at his mother. "Tell us about the barium."

"It's potentially life threatening, of course. The barium carbonate causes ventricular tachycardia. V-tach. It's a fast rhythm that originates in one of the ventricles of the heart. It can lead to ventricular fibrillation and sudden death. There are other symptoms that I won't go into. It's not a common way of poisoning, not for homicide anyway. It's usually accidental. But with everything else that's been going on, I decided to call Tyson and he asked me to speak with the Sheriff."

"Is she gonna be okay, then?" Lisa asked.

"I believe she will fully recover."

"Thank God," Lisa breathed. She walked toward the door. "I'll stay until I'm sure she's okay, then I'm leaving."

"No, you're not."

Lisa whipped around. The words came from her grandmother.

"Grams," Lisa cried, running to her side. "Oh, Grams, you're awake. How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine and you're not going anywhere."

"But..."

"Don't you argue with me when I'm feelin' so puny."

Lisa smiled at her. "Yes, ma'am."

Dr. Stewart moved forward. "Let me have a look at you. You two step out."

"Gladly," Chaz said, grabbing Lisa by the elbow. "I'm gonna talk some sense into your granddaughter."

"Why thank you, dear. That would be very nice."

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Hebrews 10:35-36

"Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised."

Chapter 19

Lisa sat slumped at the kitchen table as John and Jodi and Chaz worked around her, making coffee, starting breakfast. The sky outside was gray and threatening and completely matched her mood. Without Grams' sunny face at the stove, smiling and humming, Lisa felt completely empty.

Jodi stopped by her side, set a cup of coffee in front of her. "Here, hon, maybe this will help."

Lisa smiled up at her. "Thanks."

Jodi smiled. "I'm guessing you didn't sleep well?"

"No I did not. I had strange dreams all night and I can't stop thinking about Grams."

"I'm just happy she's gonna be okay," Jodi said. "Lisa, how about letting me get you some breakfast?"

"No. I know you're just being a friend but you don't have to take care of me. I'll be okay."

Chaz came to her, knelt beside her. "I wish I could stay with you today, but I really need to take care of the horses and see to fixin' the water line that broke again."

"It's okay. I know you have things that have to be done. I have a million things myself. Dad is gonna take the first shift at the hospital, then Shirley. The contractors are coming by today and I need to be here. I'll be turning them over to Jodi and John after that. I told Shirley I'd probably be at the hospital by five."

"Maybe I can get free by then and go with you."

She smiled briefly. "That would be great."

Chaz watched her. The small smile she'd graced him with hadn't reached her eyes. He hated to see her so down. "Sweetheart, everything's gonna be okay."

"I know."

"Then why do you look so very sad?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Something's bothering me and I can't put my finger on it. It's like nothing makes any sense."

He pulled out a chair and sat. "Anything in particular?"

She sighed. "This whole business with someone trying to get me to leave, it's ridiculous. I mean really, it's like something out of a really bad B movie. Their thought process is illogical."

"Whoever it is, Lisa, is not in their right mind. To us it may seem ridiculous, but to him it probably seems completely logical. Frighten you and you'll leave."

"But why? How could my being here possibly be a problem for anyone? It seems surreal."

"That slice across your arm was real enough."

"You don't have to tell me, the scar is right there for all to see."

"It's not so bad. And it will fade with time."

She sighed. "The scar isn't the problem, Chaz. Yes, he hurt me, but I was willing to go on, ya know? I was thinking, so he cut me. So big deal. But now, he hurt Jodi. And could've killed Grams. And don't forget Dixie. Think about it, Chaz. If something had happened to Jodi that day, and their tiny baby, think how I would feel knowing it was because of me. I don't know that I'm willing to take that chance again."

"Um, excuse me, young lady," John said, placing a plate of food in front of Jodi and taking a seat. "You have nothing to do with what happens to Jodi and me."

"I certainly do. I had everything to do with what happened to both of you on the fourth."

"You told Jodi and I about what was going on here long before we left LA. That was the extent of your responsibility. What we decide to do and the chances we decide to take are up to us, and I'll be darned if you think I'm gonna let you take that responsibility. And honestly, Jodi and I are intrigued and up for a little adventure. We can handle ourselves."

"This is not a game," Lisa said. "It's life."

"Oh, I know all about life— and death— and in a way, yeah, it is a game. Jodi and I will take our chances. We are not intimidated."

"Right," Jodi added. "Not one tiny bit."

Lisa stood, her face red. "You stupid people. This is not a game. You– could– die!" she yelled.

"So?" John answered softly.

Lisa sat, elbows on the table, leaning her head into her hands. "Am I talking to a brick wall? Why can't anybody see?"

"Lisa," Chaz said quietly. "I think what John is trying to say is, what is life if we are to be prisoners, penned in by bars or by threats? We have to be free."

"And life goes on, Lisa," John added. "I know of a surety that God exists and I'll be with Him. AND I'll have to answer to Him one day. I'm gonna have to explain what I did with what He gave me, and I do not want Him to say I ran away from evil. Better to say that I confronted it. Life goes on, even after this earthly life. Even if I wasn't speaking of my faith, I could still say that. Scientifically speaking, we are energy. Energy is matter. Matter cannot be destroyed, only changed. If something happens to Jodi or me, we will go on. What we will not do, is let someone else tell us what we can and can't do with our own lives."

Lisa sniffed as tears ran over her cheeks. She went in another direction. "He tried to kill Grams."

Chaz handed her a paper napkin and put his arms around her. "And he didn't succeed. You can't sit around and think about what might have happened."

"So what are we gonna do? Sit around and see who he tries to pick off next?"

"The police are doing an investigation."

"Do they have any ideas?" Jodi asked.

"Marcus Winstead," Chaz answered.

Lisa looked up. "What? You think Marcus is behind all this?"

"I do and so does Tyson. Convincing others has been a bit difficult. He's lived here all his life."

Lisa shook her head. "I was cut long before Marcus and I had our little encounter."

"Attempted rape is not a little encounter."

"He wasn't in his right mind."

"I can't believe you're defending him. However, you're right about one thing; he was not in his right mind and neither is the guy who cut you and tried to poison Grams and sent someone to hurt Jodi. Nor the guy who strung up Dixie or hired a bunch of thugs to jump John and me. I believe Marcus is behind it all."

Lisa sighed, slowly nodding her head. "And he did bail Glen out of jail. What is that all about?"

"Jenny told police that earlier that week Marcus and Glen spent a couple of evenings getting plastered together."

"Really?" Lisa asked.

"Yes, really. And Tyson believes Marcus is the one who supplied Glen with the Rohypnol."

"Have they searched his house?" John asked.

"No. Getting a warrant is difficult. The argument is, a couple of guys having drinks together is a big leap to one supplied the other with an illegal substance."

"Home cooking?"

"Absolutely, but I'm not giving up. There's something else about him that's been bothering me."

"What?" John and Lisa asked at the same time.

"The night you were cut, Lisa. He was here before you were taken to the hospital. Said he saw the lights and came to see what was going on."

"So?"

"Unless he was standing at the very back of his property he couldn't have seen anything. From his house, even from the lake behind his house, you can't see your property. He wouldn't have been able to see that there was anything going on over here, unless, like I said, he was standing at the fence. And why would he be there at three o'clock in the morning?"

"So you think it was him? You think Marcus broke into the house and came to my room and held me down and cut me to try to get me to leave town?"

"That is exactly what I think."

The knock at the door put the conversation to an end.

"That'll be the contractor," Lisa said, heaving a sigh.

Chaz pulled her to her feet. "Are you gonna make it?"

She nodded, smiled. "Of course. Please don't worry about me. I'm just a little down. Maybe it's the cloudy day."

He put a finger under her chin and kissed her. "I'll try to be back before you have to leave for the hospital."

"I'll look forward to it."

⌂⌂⌂

When the second crystal lamp crashed to the floor, Andrea stepped into the office. She watched calmly for a moment as Marcus looked around for something else to throw.

"Are you quite through?"

He whirled on her. "Shut up."

"Don't you dare speak to me that way. What in the world is wrong with you, Marcus?"

"She survived."

"Who? Miss Maddie?"

"Yes, of course that's who I'm talking about."

"Well, good. I'm glad she's alive."

"Andrea, you don't know what you're saying."

"I already told you, I like Miss Maddie. She's always been nice to us. You shouldn't have tried to hurt her."

"She's old. She's lonely. I was doing her a favor. I'm sure she misses her husband. I was just hurrying things along."

"Don't try to sugar coat it, Marcus. You were being greedy. And now that she didn't die, you must know that it wasn't meant for her to die. Not now. God will tell you when."

Frustrated, he ran a hand through his hair. "Andrea, it doesn't work like that."

"How would you know? Does God speak to you? No, he doesn't. But he does speak to me."

"Is that right," he said patiently. "And what does he say?"

"He's told me that everything will be okay. That Chaz is waiting for the right time for him and me to be together. He told me to be patient. I explained to him that it was very hard to be patient and he told me that's why he gave me you. You are here to help me and to take care of me and I, in return am supposed to take care of you."

"Anything else?" Marcus asked, his voice rising. "Did he say what I'm supposed to do once you have Chaz? Did he say who I was supposed to have? Because I've told you, Andrea, you are the only one for me. Just you. There can't be anyone else."

"Oh, Marcus, I don't understand why you are so selfish? Haven't I been there for you?"

"Yes," he sighed.

"Then stop thinking only about yourself. You still haven't done what I've asked of you. Maybe if you show me that you really do love me and do as I ask, I would stay with you."

He didn't answer, only swallowed hard as she placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Kill her, Marcus. Get rid of her. You do it or I will."

"Soon. I promise."

⌂⌂⌂

By mid-morning Lisa was all too willing to leave the contractors in the hands of Jodi and John. She'd been instructed to take a nap. John made her a cup of chamomile tea and she stood at her window watching Jodi in the backyard speak with a landscape designer, motioning out toward the woods.

She didn't really think she could sleep, but she kicked off her

shoes and curled up in bed anyway. She thought maybe she would snuggle down in bed and make some calls instead of sleep. She hadn't spoken with Dolly, Bill and Hank from the diner at the Bakersfield truck stop in weeks. And she really needed to touch base with Megan about the boy she'd broken up with. However, the tea did seem to be doing its job. She yawned. Perhaps a nap would be for the best. She scooted down under the soft quilt and closed her eyes.

⌂⌂⌂

She knew she was dreaming. What was happening was too disjointed to be real. Dixie screeched and jumped on her. Then suddenly she was a much larger cat. She jumped down and ran out of the room. Marcus was on top of her, his body pinning her to the mattress, telling her it had to be done. The knife sliced deep into the flesh of her arm. Suddenly they were on the ground by the lake and his body pushed her hard against the cold ground. "I'm in love with you, Lisa. You're the one I've been waiting for all my life."

She struggled, trying to get him off. He was much bigger than Glen. Heavier. Dixie jumped on his back. He shrieked and tossed her aside. Suddenly Lisa was running, screaming for Chaz to help her, but he didn't come. She ran until she collapsed against a tree. The voices came then. She pulled her legs up to her chest and covered her ears.

"Grams was sick a few weeks before you showed up," Chaz said.

"Lisa, you make me so hot," Glen said.

"I'm sorry," Marcus said. "I don't know what came over me. I lost control."

"Stop crying and act like the professional you're supposed to be," Lou said.

"I used to have a cat but he ran away when I was in the hospital, just before you came home," Grams said.

"Be still or would you like me to hurt the little old lady downstairs?"

"He made a pie, it really didn't taste right. He needs lots of lessons."

"Just one drink, for old time's sake."

"Sorry, but this has to be done. Leave and don't come back."

"What did you do to my brother you whore?"

"Get a grip, Lisa. And don't call me mother."

"I'm sorry, I lost control."

"He drugged you."

"She's been poisoned."

"The cat never came back."

Lisa sat straight up, gasping for air, tears streaming. She stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom and began splashing cold water on her face. Huddled over the sink she waited until the urge to cry subsided, but it didn't and finally, she gave into it.

Emerging sometime later, she sat on the bed and began pulling on her tennis shoes. She needed to get out. Go for a walk maybe. She had to get out.

As she came downstairs she could hear voices in the dining room. She glanced in to see the plans laid out on the giant table.

Jodi looked up when Lisa poked her head in. She excused herself for a moment and went to speak to Lisa.

"How was the nap?" Jodi asked.

Lisa shook her head. "Bad dreams."

Jodi frowned. "This is the third and last contractor for the day. Want to take some time when he leaves and we'll have a girl talk?"

Lisa smiled. "Thanks, but I just need to get some air. I'm going for a walk."

"Where?"

"Don't worry. Just around the yard. I just need some time alone to think."

"I understand. Looks like it may rain though."

"It's been looking like that all day."

Jodi shrugged. "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Really. Go back to your meeting and we'll talk about everything later."

"Okay. See ya. Be careful."

Lisa slipped out the back door. Sighing heavily, she turned her face up toward the sky. She could see some splotches of blue. Maybe it wouldn't rain after all. She drew a deep breath and headed out toward the pecan grove.

Everything she'd dreamed kept running through her brain. She needed to think. Just think. For some reason it seemed like everything was more confusing than ever. Chaz believes Marcus is the one who cut her. There had been something on the edges of her memory that would confirm that. The dream had helped her to remember.

The man who'd cut her had lain on top of her, trying to keep her still. She knew it wasn't Glen. This man was much bigger than Glen. Marcus had lain on her that night by the lake. The more she thought about it, the more she believed that it had been Marcus both times. But

why? What problem could she possibly be to Marcus? If it is him, it isn't because she'd turned him down. He'd cut her long before he'd taken her out that night. What possible threat could she be to Marcus?

She looked up, realizing she'd passed the pecan grove and headed into the woods. It was quiet here, like she remembered when she'd walked with Chaz, but much darker. She supposed that was due to the cloudy day. She looked up through the trees but this time could see no patches of blue. Venturing farther in, she searched for the big rock she and Chaz had sat on. Her mind kept circling, speculating.

If Marcus wanted to get rid of her so much without even knowing her it had to be that she'd interfered with something he had going before she'd arrived. But what? She knew he had come over to visit with Grams many times. Grams spoke fondly of him. Right up until he'd tried to rape Lisa by the lake. Even then Grams had talked to Lisa about forgiveness.

She stopped and looked around, but still didn't see the rock. She hadn't thought it was so far into the woods. Perhaps she'd entered at a different point than last time. She hadn't been paying attention and had no idea at which point she'd entered the woods. Probably needed to go off to the right instead of deeper into the woods.

So, Grams and Marcus had been friends. Grams said Marcus wanted her to teach him to cook. Or she said, she needed to teach him to cook. She'd said he tried to bake her a pie and that it was awful. Lisa stopped, placing her hand over her heart to keep it from racing. It was awful. Grams had said he really needed some lessons. What if, what if it was awful because he'd put something in it? What if this isn't the first time Grams had been poisoned?

Chaz said Grams had been in the hospital just a few weeks before Lisa had arrived. Was that about the time she'd tasted Marcus' pie? And didn't Grams say that's when her cat ran away? Did Marcus kill her cat like he had Dixie? No, obviously, not like Dixie or Grams would have said so, but maybe the cat got into the same pie. Maybe it went away to die. She placed her hand over her stomach as bile rose into her throat.

Taking a moment to gather herself, she peered around, realizing she'd never found the big rock she and Chaz had rested on during their walk. Well, she wasn't lost. She could hear the creek even now. Figuring if she'd make her way down to the creek she could find the spot she'd visited once before. She turned and headed that way. At the same time, her mind raced over all the possibilities of what Marcus

might be capable of and why?

Saying for a minute he actually did want to get rid of Grams and her, she still couldn't think of why. Why? Her head was so filled with horror it was becoming difficult to reason. Did he harbor some old grudge? Did Grams discipline him when he'd been just a boy and he vowed he would get revenge someday? The more she thought about it the more she was convinced that Chaz was absolutely right. It's been Marcus all along. Still, what did he have to do with Glen? Now there's a puzzle. Tyson believes Marcus gave Glen the stuff to put in her drink. Why? Entertainment?

She stopped as she emerged at the creek. Immediately, her shoes and socks came off and she waded into the cool water. Watching the clear water bubble past her feet she let her tired mind go. She needed to clear her head. She also needed to talk to Chaz about everything she suspected. A huge drop of water landed beside her, then another. She looked skyward, realizing she was about to get drenched because the sky was about to open up.

She waded out of the water and sat down on the bank to pull on her shoes and socks. She wasn't sure what made her look up. She hadn't heard anything really. Just that funny feeling you get at the back of your neck when you feel like someone is watching. Stilling, she listened intently, then turned abruptly at the sound of leaves rustling behind her. Heart pounding, her eyes scanned the forest. Nothing. There was nothing there. Probably just a squirrel, she thought, breathing a sigh of relief.

The relief lasted only a second, though. As she reached toward her sock she heard a breath drawn. She froze, her heart racing. Slowly, she turned her head first to the right, then left, searching the dark recesses of the woods, but she saw no one. This time she was sure she wasn't just being paranoid. Someone was nearby, watching her. If it was Marcus this would be his chance to do whatever he wanted. Lightning flashed, much closer than she would've desired and that got her moving. Casting aside the idea of putting on her shoes, she grabbed them up and hurried in the direction of the house. Lightning flashed again and the thunder exploded. She moved faster but stopped when she thought she heard footsteps right beside her. Frantically she whirled, but saw no one.

Her breath was coming in gasps now, the hairs on her head stood on end. She took off. Lightning flashed all around her and the sky opened up. She thought she heard the footsteps again. They sounded

like they were right behind her, but she didn't dare stop. She ran as fast as her legs would carry her, stumbling over sticks and pine cones in her bare feet. A large fallen tree branch sent her sprawling face down on the forest floor. Terrified to look behind her, she scrambled to her feet and took off again.

Lost. She was lost. The torrential rain along with the constant lightning effectively blinded her. She had no idea if she was moving toward the house or back toward the creek or sideways. Her heart filled with panic. She forced herself to overcome her fright long enough to stop and try to get her bearings, but searching for some kind of landmark was fruitless. Everything looked alike. She thought she saw a human shadow next to a tree nearby and shrieked as she took off again. A low branch whipped past her face, stinging her but she didn't slow. She leapt over a stump and fell in a hole, scrambled back up and continued on.

Peering ahead she thought she saw something white and hoped with all her heart it was the house showing through the trees. She flew as fast as her legs would carry her when suddenly there was a chest in front of her. She let out a blood-curdling scream. Strong arms came around her.

"Lisa, it's me."

"Chaz," she sobbed, throwing herself against his chest. "Chaz there's someone out there."

Peering through the trees he tried to see who may have been following her. He didn't doubt her for a second, but trees were extremely camouflaging and with the downpour and the wind, he doubted he'd be able to see the person if they didn't want to be seen.

"Come, on, Red, let's get you in the house." He looked down at her feet. "Where are your shoes?"

She sniffed, pushing her tangled wet hair out of her face. "I don't know. I dropped them somewhere between here and the creek."

Scooping her up he started toward the farmhouse. She snuggled up under his chin, steeping herself in the warmth of his body, marveling at his strength and the feel of his hard chest next to her cheek. They walked across an open field in the middle of one of the worst storms Lisa had ever seen, with lightning flashing all around and thunder crashing, and yet, never had she felt so safe, or so comforted. She peered toward the house as they neared. Home had never looked so inviting.

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Lisa smiled down at the sweet woman who had come to mean so much to her. "Dr. Stewart said you're gonna be able to come home in a few more days."

"I can't wait. What in the world are y'all doing for food?"

Lisa laughed. "We're managing. It seems Jodi likes to cook."

"Hey now, I can hold my own in the kitchen," Chaz said from the other side of the bed.

"Really? I haven't seen you cook anything," Lisa argued.

He shrugged. "Well, I mean, as long as someone else is taking care of it, why rock the boat?"

Lisa took her grandmother's hand. "Grams, let me get serious a minute. There's something I want to ask you about, if you feel like talking about it. It's about Marcus."

"I feel fine, dear. What would you like to know?"

"When Marcus was little, did you ever have to like, discipline him? I mean, like, did he get into your yard or your flowers or something like that and you had to speak with his parents or maybe speak with him yourself?"

Maddie shook her head. "No. Never. He only came around every once in a while. Usually selling something like raffle tickets, or when he got older he spoke to Lawrence about buying some life insurance."

Chaz and Lisa both stood up straighter. "Did he buy it?"

"No. Lawrence already had that covered. He took good care of me. Then Marcus got out of the insurance business and went into real estate. He did come by a few times after Lawrence passed, asking if I wanted to sell the place. He thought maybe it was too much for me to handle."

Chaz glanced at Lisa.

"I let him know that it was very sweet for him to be thinking of me, but with Chaz coming around to help me, I was just fine. I'd lived in that house almost my entire married life and there was no way I was gonna leave it."

"Of course not," Lisa said, squeezing her hand. "There's something else I wanted to ask, Grams."

"Shoot."

"You told me once that Marcus wanted to learn to cook. That he brought you a pie I think you said, and that it tasted pretty bad."

"Oh, yes. It was an apple pie. Apple crumb pie, actually. Horrible. Very bitter. I'd been meaning to let him know gently that he needed some help in the cooking area, but then he pulled that stunt with you

and I didn't think it would be wise."

Lisa nodded. "Thanks for that, but Grams, can you remember when it was he brought you that pie?"

"Oh, sure. I'm not senile yet," she laughed. "Hmm, let's see, it was actually just a few weeks before you got here, I believe. Maybe near the first of May. Oh, yes. It was just a few days before May first because he said he might take a pie to the Spring picnic at church. Oh, my, I never got back to him about it. I hope he didn't take one to the social. It was just terrible tasting."

"Grams, do you remember why you never got back to him about it?" Lisa asked.

"Well, yes, dear, I became ill. Chaz knows," she said patting his hand where he gripped the bed rail. "Chaz is the one who was so kind to spare time to take me to the hospital."

Lisa looked up at Chaz. "You told me Maddie had become ill just before I got here. You said she spent several days in the hospital. Is this the time you were talking about?"

"Yes," Chaz said, shaking his head as he and Lisa realized what had been happening. "She had severe nausea and vomiting, and her blood pressure was sky high. They never did figure out what was wrong."

Lisa looked back at Maddie. "Grams, has Marcus been to see you lately? Has he brought you anything else to eat, to sample?"

"No, dear, I haven't laid eyes on Marcus. Are you actually thinking he's the one that tried to poison me? If so, that's absurd."

"Grams, everything points to Marcus being behind everything that's going on."

"Chaz, do you feel that way too?" Grams asked.

Chaz nodded. "I'm afraid I do, Maddie."

"But why?" Grams asked. "Why would he try to hurt me?"

"And me," Lisa added. "I think he's the one who broke in that night. And the one who killed Dixie."

"I don't understand why he would do something like that."

"I think I'm beginning to understand," Chaz said. "But before I say anything I want to speak with Tyson."

Lisa eyed him. She wouldn't say anything right now, but no way was he gonna think he can keep his theories to himself. She turned her attention back to Maddie. "Grams, you got sick right after you ate the pie. What happened to that pie? Do you remember?"

Brow furrowed, Maddie tried to recall what she'd done with the

pie. "You know, I can't remember what happened to that pie. The last I recall it was sitting on my kitchen counter. I don't remember it still being there when I finally got home from the hospital."

Lisa nodded. "And the cat, Grams. Didn't you tell me the cat disappeared while you were in the hospital?"

"The cat? Henry? Why, yes. I never saw him again. I miss that old tom cat."

"Don't you think it's strange that you get home and the cat and the pie are just gone?"

"Well, I do now. I didn't give it a second thought back then."

"And I'm sure someone was counting on that."

"Oh dear," Grams said softly. "This is just awful."

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Psalm 140:1-3

"Rescue me, LORD, from evildoers; protect me from the violent, who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day. They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent's; the poison of vipers is on their lips."

Chapter 20

Glancing down at the sleeping woman beside him, Chaz's heart filled with love. She'd come so quickly into his life. A life he'd thought would never have another happy day. He'd tried to think of when it was she'd stolen his heart. Smiling, he pinpointed it to the moment she'd hit him in the head with the blood pressure monitor. She had quite a temper, which was evident presently.

They'd argued from the moment they'd left Miss Maddie's hospital room, all the way to the truck and halfway home. Finally, she'd gone silent on him, leaned her seat back and closed her eyes. Even then she'd found something else to argue about.

In an effort to be more comfortable, she'd unclicked her seat belt.

"Put it on," he'd ordered.

"Don't you tell me what to do," she'd spat back at him.

"Fine. I won't say another word." He'd simply pulled off the road, leaned over and fastened her belt for her.

She'd fought him. He grinned now just thinking about it. She'd released the belt quickly. He'd refastened it just as fast. When she went to undo it again, he'd caught her arm, held it in a vise-like grip. She'd glared up at him. And then, he'd broken his vow to not speak another word.

"I'm not budging on this," he'd said quietly.

"Fine," she'd said with a pout, turned her head away, closed her eyes and gone to sleep.

The argument had started over his wanting to speak with Tyson about the suspicions he'd formed about Marcus. They weren't solid. He didn't know if they were even feasible. It wasn't that he was trying to keep anything from Lisa. He'd wanted to find out what happened to property in Georgia when someone dies and there is no one to inherit. Once he'd done the research he would've told her what he was thinking.

Finally he'd said okay and told her anyway. It wasn't like he was trying to keep her in the dark, though that's what she accused him of. She said he was trying to pull some "macho bull." Actually, her words

had been a bit more descriptive. He smiled at that. Silly. A silly, stupid argument and he'd enjoyed every minute of it.

They'd be home soon enough and he would make it all up to her. Sighing, his mind switched back to the real problem. Could this whole thing be about Marcus wanting Maddie's land? Did he think to kill off Maddie, scare off Lisa and somehow get control of the land? Had he forgotten about Louise? It seemed utterly absurd, but unlike comic book characters, the criminal mind isn't always brilliant, and Marcus has a criminal mind. Chaz had known that since they were kids.

Turning off the interstate onto the state highway Chaz was happy to be almost home because it had been a long day. He slowed as he passed the spot where Cari and Julie had lost their lives. They'd only been less than ten miles from home. Breathing deeply he sped up and hurried along the dark road. Lisa stirred and he reached over to take her hand. He was a lucky man to have found and shared the love of two amazing women.

Flashing lights had him glancing in the rearview mirror. Not a cop, he thought, breathing a sigh of relief. A tow truck. He checked his speed anyway, but he frowned as the tow truck got closer. This guy is flying, Chaz thought. He looked ahead. The two-lane highway was empty. The truck will be able to pass easily, but when he glanced back in the mirror, his heart raced. Does this guy not see us? He's comin' on way too fast. Chaz began to wonder if Lisa's truck taillights had gone out. After all, the pickup was old and he hadn't really checked it over before they'd left the house.

The tow truck was bearing down on them now and gave no inclination of passing. Chaz tapped his brakes just in case the guy didn't see their taillights. The truck was right on top of them. Chaz had no choice but to floor it. The smaller pickup jumped forward and he was able to put some distance between them.

The tow truck's brights came on. "Son of a..." Chaz mumbled.

Lisa woke, startled. "What is it? What's the matter?" she asked, adjusting her seat to the upright position.

Chaz didn't answer right away. He was too busy driving. The little six-cylinder was not gonna go any faster and the tow truck was much too powerful.

Lisa looked behind them. "What's happening? What in the world is this guy doing?"

"Hold on," Chaz yelled just before they were rammed in the rear.

Lisa shrieked as their truck fish-tailed. Chaz regained control, but

only just in time to be slammed from behind again. That one knocked them ahead and gave him a few feet. He knew he had to get out from in front of that tow truck and the only way he could do it was to ditch. The decision of when and where was taken out of his hands. The tow truck bashed them one more time and they careened off the highway just before a small bridge. The pickup went airborne as Lisa screamed. They landed halfway down the embankment and kept right on going.

"Tree! Tree! Tree!" Lisa cried.

Chaz pulled on the wheel as hard as he could to barely miss the giant pine. The truck turned sharply to the right, went briefly up on the two right wheels and finally landed with a resounding thump. Lisa sat in a daze. Chaz, however, was still in survival mode. Instinctively he started for the glove compartment where he kept his gun, but quickly remembered they weren't in his Explorer. He ripped off Lisa's seatbelt and pulled her across the truck and out his door. "Come on," he said quietly.

Grabbing her hand he dragged her through some undergrowth, toward the cement barrier under the bridge and tossed her to the ground. He lay close to her.

"What's happening?" she cried.

"Shh," he whispered. "I'm making sure he doesn't come back to finish the job. I'm hoping he was content to run us off the road and keep going." Chaz ran his hand over her forehead. "Are you okay?"

She closed her eyes, nodded her head. "I think so, other than I'm shaking like a leaf."

"I'm a little shaken up myself." He rose slightly, trying to see her face more clearly. "Lisa, you're bleeding."

"I am?" She felt her face, searching for the source.

"You've got blood all over you."

Lisa looked up at him. "Oh, Chaz, it's you. You're bleeding. From your head."

He smiled. "It's me? Good."

"I don't think it's good."

Chaz looked around. "I don't think he's coming back." He rolled over and pulled his cell phone from his pocket.

Lisa listened as Chaz called his brother and then John. They could've been killed. Chaz could be dead. His poor family would've had to bury another loved one. How ironic that he would've died the same way his wife and daughter did. Lord, but she was being morbid. They didn't die. Chaz is alive. And so is she. Even though there were

tears streaming down her cheeks she began to laugh hysterically.

Chaz knew she was showing signs of shock, but he still had to ask. "What, Lisa darling, do you think is so funny?"

"I'm just," she stopped, tried to quit giggling. "I'm just glad I had on my seatbelt."

They both burst into laughter.

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It was close to midnight. The flashing lights of the emergency vehicles reflected eerily against the trees that surrounded them. Chaz sat halfway in the passenger side of Tyson's sheriff's cruiser while a paramedic worked on the split in his forehead. They determined he'd hit the steering wheel before the air bag deployed or the air bag itself did the damage.

It had rained on and off for most of the day making the air muggy and sticky. Even though the temperature remained above eighty degrees, Lisa's teeth were chattering. She watched as a tow truck pulled her pickup from the dry ravine. A paramedic placed a blanket around her shoulders.

"Let me get you to come and sit down, Lisa," the man said.

Dazed, Lisa looked at him. It was Tim, Chaz's friend.

"Come on," he urged.

She obeyed him only because she couldn't think of a reason not to follow his orders.

She sat halfway in the back of the same sheriff's car Chaz was in.

"Is she okay?" Chaz asked.

"She's okay, maybe a little shocky," Tim said as he began to take her blood pressure.

"You need stitches," Robert said to Chaz.

"Butterfly me. I'll be fine."

"I knew you were gonna say that."

Tyson approached. "There are forty-eight businesses within a twenty-mile radius that own at least one tow truck. We'll start close and work our way out from there."

"Lots of things I need to speak with you about, bro, first thing in the morning," Chaz said.

Tyson nodded. "You got it."

Chaz sighed. "I'll call you and see when we can meet. And we're gonna go see your boss."

Tyson sighed, ran a hand through his hair. "Maybe you can do what I've been unable to do."

Lisa half listened. This whole thing was about her and they were talking as if she wasn't even here. Maybe they were trying to protect her, but none of this would be happening if not for her. Now Chaz's head was bashed in. This cannot go on. She was gonna have to do something. Something drastic. She would give Chaz and Tyson until tomorrow morning to get a warrant to search the Winstead home. After that, she's taking things into her own hands.

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"Where have you been?" Andrea demanded as she stormed into the study. "It's two o'clock in the morning. You had me worried."

"None of your business, little girl."

"I'm not a little girl, as you well know."

"Please, Andrea, don't say stuff like that."

"Well, your stupid little friend came by and I ended up having to entertain him."

He whirled on her. "What friend?"

"That Glen idiot from California."

Marcus scowled. "What did *he* want?"

"He was mad and told me to give you a message."

"Oh yeah? What was that?" Marcus asked, pouring himself two fingers of scotch.

"He said something about finding out that you knew they were coming. He didn't really make any sense. What is he talking about?"

Marcus slumped down in the leather desk chair. "Again, none of your business."

"Why do you insist on treating me like a child? I want to know what's going on, Marcus."

"As far as Glen's concerned, nothing. Nothing is going on. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time and he got arrested and blames me for it." Marcus shrugged. "I couldn't care less. He's a weasel, not worthy of my time."

"Oh, well then, I guess I shouldn't have shown him such a good time, huh?"

Marcus didn't move, but his eyes followed his little sister as she sashayed across the room. "I know you better than that so you can forget it."

She pouted. "Okay, so then, what are you doing about Lisa?"

"I said I'd take care of it and you're just gonna have to trust me. I don't want anyone questioning you where you'd have to lie. You don't know anything about it and that's how it will remain."

"So, I mean, you're talking like it's already done."

"I didn't say that. I'm just saying whenever it does happen, you won't know a thing. Now, go to bed."

"Don't you order me around."

He sighed. "I'm tired, Andrea. I need some time alone."

"Fine then, but if you don't do something soon I'm gonna take matters into my own hands."

"You'll do nothing of the sort."

"Just watch me," Andrea said with a smug grin. What he didn't know was, she already had.

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"I'm not sure that I want to go," Lisa argued, holding the phone between her cheek and shoulder as she finished the breakfast dishes. "After last night, I'm really tired and sore."

"Come on, Sis," Megan urged. "It's been planned for over a week. You need to get out and forget everything that's happened for a while. We'll show Jodi all the good places in Atlanta and we can all visit Miss Maddie."

Lisa smiled. The 'Sis' got to her and she knew that Megan knew it would. "I do want to see Grams, even though she's coming home the day after tomorrow. I don't want her to go even one day without having family there with her."

"Now you're talking. We'll have a blast. We'll stop at that new little shop I told you about. We'll do lunch in Buckhead. Hit Lenox Square. A girl needs to get out and shop."

Lisa sighed. "I guess I can make it." But even as she said the words she knew she'd rather tag along with Chaz, or, figure out what she could do to make all the violence stop.

"Oh, good. So, we're all meeting at your house at ten."

"Oh really?"

Megan laughed. "Yep, I knew you'd give in. Now, go get dressed. Cindy borrowed her dad's Expedition so we'll all fit just fine. See ya soon. Love ya. Byeee."

Lisa looked at her cell. Call ended. "Well, Megan does know how to get her way, doesn't she?"

"Who was that?" Chaz asked as he came in the back door, having already been to see about the horses.

Lisa looked him over. His forehead was blue and purple but he was standing strong. He came close and put his arms around her. "Is it a secret?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. It was Megan. I was trying to get out of going on a shopping excursion with them today but she acts as if she's desperate for me to come."

"You are going aren't you?" He asked as he nuzzled her neck.

"I just told her I would, against my better judgment."

"Good. You need some time away before all the construction begins tomorrow." His mouth moved to her chin, then her cheeks, feathering soft kisses, making her want to stay home and stay just like that with him. "Are you still mad at me?"

Lisa sighed. "No, of course not. How could I stay mad when you were such a hero last night, but, just look at you, Chaz. You've barely healed from getting beat up on July fourth, and now just look at your poor head."

He straightened and frowned. "I didn't get beat up."

She smiled up at him. "Oh, Chaz, I'm sorry, darling, did I go and bruise your ego?"

"Ouch, Lisa. You're killin' me."

"Chaz, really, I'm not kidding around. I hate that you're hurt. I just hate it. Do you still think it's Marcus? Do you think he was driving that truck last night or do you think he hired someone to do it? And if so, they won't stop, will they? It won't stop until I leave or I'm dead. And it doesn't seem to matter if someone else gets hurt in the fallout. What do they call that? Collateral damage?"

"Yeah, that's what they call it. So what are you saying? Maybe we should just throw you off a bridge and all our troubles will be over, huh?"

She looked down, not amused. "Maybe you should. I do wish I could go with you to see Tyson and Sam."

"What would be the purpose in that? I guarantee you wouldn't be able to do any more than we can."

She pushed him. "I hate when you say stuff like that."

He backed away. "Oops, sorry. I swear it wasn't a sexist statement. Just logical." His cell phone rang, saving him from one of her tirades. "Tyson, thanks for calling. So, listen, Lisa and I have been talking and we've come to some conclusions and we definitely believe it's Marcus behind all this."

Lisa listened carefully to the one side of the conversation she was privy to.

"I understand that, but we can get Maddie to testify that he brought her a pie back in April and afterward she became deathly ill...that's

right...you remember when I took her to the hospital...No, they didn't ever find the cause, not that time..."

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. His next words sounded defeated.

"Because we know. We just know...I understand that the judge doesn't take gut instinct into account...but there is a lot of circumstantial evidence...yeah, well we can't prove it was poison last time but it definitely is this time...No, she said she can't recall Marcus bringing her anything this time. Still, he could've slipped her something with all the July fourth stuff going on...Well, what about Lisa realizing it was Marcus on top of her the night she was cut...She realized later that it was him, after he assaulted her down by the lake on his property...No, she didn't realize it right away...She knows now because she— she had a dream and it became clear to her."

Even Lisa realized just how stupid that sounded. The judge is never gonna issue a warrant. She or someone she loves will have to be dead.

"No...Yes...I'll be there shortly...I don't know, Ty, but I have to do something."

That last sentence made Lisa fume. Oh, *he* has to do something? What about her? That's exactly how she feels. And now he's making her go off to do something as silly as shop while he goes in to meet with the sheriff. Well– in all fairness, he's not making her. He simply stated it would be a good idea.

Jodi and John arrived in the kitchen, happy and glowing. Lisa couldn't help but smile at the couple. She glanced back at Chaz who winked at her.

"So, are you ready to go?" Chaz asked John.

"Ready as I'll ever be to take a group of women shopping."

"You're going?" Lisa asked.

"He and Chaz have decided that we need an escort for protection," Jodi said.

"Oh, really?" Lisa asked.

"Yes, oh really," Chaz said, eyebrows raised in defiance. "I have to meet with Tyson and Sam. John and I talked last night and decided you shouldn't go out alone."

Lisa didn't argue. She was frightened. As much for everyone else as for herself so she was glad John would be along for the ride.

Chaz came to her, took her hand and raised her fingers to his lips. "Somehow, Red, we'll get through this. We're gonna be okay."

"I hope so, Chaz. I'm just so frustrated. I feel like I need to do something. I feel like I've put everyone in danger."

"We've already been over that. We're family. We stick together. This is your home and no one is gonna force you to leave."

She smiled. "You're a good man, Chaz. You know, I'm in love with you."

"So you've said. And I'm so darn much in love with you, it hurts, but it's a good hurt."

He lowered his head, brushed his lips back and forth across her mouth, breathing in her essence.

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Marcus slammed down the phone. They lived. Unbelievable. The witch had nine lives– unlike her cat, he chuckled to himself. He's gonna have to get up close and personal. Why hadn't she just left? It's not like she'd grown up here and had close ties. Why did she have to be so stubborn? Well, things are about to get ugly, he thought. He'd hoped never to have to do this again. Miss Maddie didn't count. She's old and all alone. Andrea said he was sugar coating it, but he really did feel Maddie's demise would be best for her, and all concerned.

He didn't want to have to do what had to be done. He thought of Andrea's sweet face. For her. Always, for her.

"Hi," Andrea said from the doorway of the study.

He smiled at her. "Good morning."

"Any plans today?"

"I'm going to be doing something real soon, Andrea. This morning, however, I have a very rich client who's interested in purchasing some land close to Savannah."

"Savannah?" Andrea said. "That's at least two hours away."

"You want to tag along?"

"No," she said quickly. "I have my own plans."

"Like what?"

She smiled. "I'm going shopping."

"That's nice. It will be good for you to get out and get your mind off things."

She smiled sweetly. "Maybe so."

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Lisa watched as Megan and Jodi chattered incessantly while Cindy and Steph ate an impromptu breakfast of some of Maddie's leftover muffins they'd found in the fridge.

"I'm so sorry you got roped into this," Lisa said to John.

He shook his head. "I've suffered worse fates than being surrounded by a bunch of beautiful women."

"Oh, isn't he sweet," Cindy said.

"He's always like that," Jodi admitted, as John rolled his eyes.

"Why can't I find a guy like that," Megan complained.

"You're lookin' in all the wrong places," Cindy quipped.

John excused himself at the sound of a knock on the front door. When he came back into the kitchen with the newcomer, the room became silent.

Andrea stood there next to John, wringing her hands and looking quite pious. She smiled brilliantly. "Hi everyone. I am so sorry to crash your party and all. I hope you don't mind. I'm just so bored and lonely. Shanna told me you all were going shopping today and, look, I know we're not the best of friends, but would you mind if I tag along? I'm just at my wit's end lately. Marcus is out showing land practically in Savannah and probably won't be home until late and I'll just be sitting there at the house going crazy. Shanna has to work and so does Blaire and I just really need some company. Would you mind terribly? After all, we are neighbors, it's time we started acting like it, don't you think?"

There were several seconds of silence before Megan broke it. "You're kidding, right?"

"Oh, Megan, tell me you don't mind. Like I said, I know we haven't been the best of friends, but we're older now. Can't we put that all behind us?"

John watched the group. He wasn't easily taken in and he didn't trust this girl. Still, it's always wise to keep your enemies close. Surprisingly, it was Lisa who gave in.

"Of course we can," Lisa said among a collective gasp. "That's what we're supposed to do, isn't it? Everybody makes mistakes. Of course you can come."

Cindy rolled her eyes. Megan shook her head. Jodi grinned, thinking things were getting interesting. Steph kept her mouth filled with muffin.

"Oh, wonderful! This is gonna be so much fun," Andrea chimed.

"Oh, just so much," Cindy added, not bothering to disguise the sarcasm, and making the others smile.

Lisa bided her time while everyone made pit stops and repaired their makeup. Just as they began to walk out the door she played her card. Raising a hand to her head she groaned.

"What's wrong?" Jodi asked.

"Oh, no, I can't believe it's happening now. It feels like I have a migraine coming on."

Jodi frowned. "You once told me you don't get migraines."

"Then this is like that headache I had that day in the office. Oh, Lord, it's getting bad fast." She sat down heavily and John knelt beside her, took her hand, began massaging it.

"Where's the center of the pain?" John asked.

His eyes narrowed at Lisa's hesitation. He looked up. "Hey everyone, why don't you go ahead out to the car, get the AC cranked up and let me help Lisa for a minute."

"If Lisa's not coming then I don't want to go either," Megan said.

"Oh, nonsense. Please, everyone, go and have fun. Do it for me. Really. I just know if I go now I won't be able to have fun and I'd probably end up getting sick all over my own shoes."

"Oh, that's lovely, sis," Megan said. She looked Lisa over. "You really feeling that bad?"

"Horrible," Lisa said softly. "Maybe it has something to do with last night. After what happened, I really just want to go to bed."

"What happened last night?" Andrea asked.

"Oh, I guess you didn't hear," Cindy said, a little too sarcastically, Lisa thought.

"Hear what?"

"Someone tried to kill Chaz and Lisa last night."

"What?" Andrea gasped.

She looked to Lisa, her face white. She seemed genuinely upset, Lisa thought. Maybe there was more to the girl than Lisa had originally thought.

"Someone ran me and Chaz off the road last night. If we hadn't been able to dodge a tree we probably would have been killed."

"Oh no, I can't believe it." Andrea's hand covered her mouth. "This is terrible. This is just terrible. And Chaz is okay? And you?"

"Yeah, I'm okay, and Chaz got a major bump on the head, but he'll be okay."

"I can't believe it."

"Well, it happened," Cindy assured her.

"Come on, everyone," Jodi urged. "No use standing around here talking about things we can't change. Let's let John see to Lisa."

John watched as they all gathered purses and cell phones and went out to wait in the car. "Okay, Lisa, what's the story," he said the

moment the door closed.

"Wow," Lisa said. "You're good."

"Don't try to change the subject."

She sighed. "John, I just can't spend a whole day with that girl, I just can't. I realize it's not fair of me. She probably doesn't even know what her brother is up to. She certainly seemed innocent enough just now."

"Yes," John agreed. "She did. I get the feeling though, that she was much more worried about Chaz than you."

"Of course she is. She's known him all her life. Look, I really do have a headache but it's not that bad. I'm just really tired and the thought of having to spend the whole day chatting and shopping and smiling when all I want to do is sleep, it seems unbearable. Add having to deal with Andrea on top of all that, I just can't."

"But you were the one who gave in and told her she could come."

"I know, I know. She seemed so pitiful there for a moment and everyone was being so harsh, I was embarrassed for her. Look, I don't hate her. I barely even know her. I'm just feeling very unsociable. Please explain it to everyone."

"Okay, fine, Miss Lisa, but I'll have to call Chaz and let him know that you stayed home."

"Okay. Or, actually, I'll call him. I want to try to talk him into coming home."

"I thought you wanted to go to bed."

Lisa smiled. "That too."

John rose, grinning at Lisa. "Anyway, you won't have to talk him into it. Soon as you tell him you're home alone he'll be here in fifteen minutes. You're gonna call him right away?"

"Yes, I promise."

"I want the alarm turned on the moment I walk out this door."

"Of course."

"I wouldn't be allowing this except for Andrea saying Marcus is in Savannah."

"Allowing?"

"Yep, I'm pulling macho bullcrap. You can complain to Jodi later. I'm gonna call you in a little while so make sure you answer your phone."

"Okay. Now stop playing mother hen to me and go."

He patted her head, stepped outside and stayed by the front door until she'd turned on the alarm. Lisa waved from the front window as

the large SUV pulled away with John at the wheel. One minute later her cell phone rang.

"Hello, John."

"Call Chaz."

"I was just about to but I had an incoming call."

"Sorry. I'm hanging up. Call now."

"Okay, okay." She ended the call.

Chaz would get the call from her, but not right away. Finally, she had the chance to do something. Andrea was away with the group and Marcus was out until evening. It was time to pay a little visit to the Winstead home. She'd figure out a way to get in.

Lisa changed clothes quickly to some black slacks with pockets and a dark green top. Grabbing her phone, she went downstairs to find other tools she might need. After going through Maddie's tool box she added a small putty knife, and a Phillips screwdriver. A giant plastic zip-lock freezer bag completed her ensemble. Dialing John's cell, she turned off the alarm and headed out the back door.

"Yes," John said.

"Chaz can't come home right away so I'm going to bed. I'm just letting you know so that if you try to call me later and I don't answer, I'll be asleep."

"Okay. Well, there's some herbal teas in the cabinet if you want to try some."

"No thanks. I just wanna sleep."

"If Chaz isn't home by the time you wake up, call me."

"Will do. Thanks, John."

She ended the call, stuffed the phone in her pocket and commenced climbing the side fence. She drew a deep breath. She was a little bit afraid. Her heart raced. But finally, she would put an end to all this mess.

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Psalm 56:3-4

"When I am afraid,
I put my trust in you.
In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can flesh do to me?"

Chapter 21

No way. No way did they leave the house wide open. It's just impossible. Maybe there's a maid, or some kind of cleaning staff. Lisa circled around the house for the third time, looking for movement of any kind. Any sound. Nothing. Not a soul was here. She smiled. They were making this way too easy.

She approached the house from the rear. The large pool and patio area was sleek and modern, like what she was used to at the hotels. Not at all in keeping with the character of the house. Maybe it was her imagination, but looking up at the three-story home, it seemed to loom over her menacingly.

She looked back over her shoulder, her eyes skimming the lake area where Marcus had assaulted her. It seemed benign in the bright light of day. Turning back, she shook off the feeling of impending doom and reached toward the kitchen doorknob. She already knew it would open. When she'd tried it the first time it had amazed her. That was when she took off searching through windows and side doors to find nothing was locked.

What an amazingly arrogant gesture, she thought as she stepped inside the house. She smiled. As if she wasn't being incredibly arrogant herself at this moment.

She walked softly at first, straining to hear any sound. A radio, a TV, someone moving, anything, but all she could hear was a clock ticking and the air conditioner running.

She began in the kitchen, under the sink, looking for the rat poison, but there was nothing. She quietly pulled out drawers and opened cabinets. Nothing. Sighing heavily, she forced herself to remain calm and continue the search. It was a large home with lots of nooks and crannies. She needed to be patient and meticulous. She was gonna put an end to this reign of terror.

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Andrea was seething. Marcus had tried to kill Lisa, which was what she'd asked him to do, but she had specifically told him not to hurt Chaz. Oh, there was gonna be hell to pay. How dare he go after Chaz knowing how she felt about him. Did he think she wouldn't find out? Did he think to get rid of his competition? If only he understood that there is no competition. Chaz is the one she loved, had always

loved. Marcus was a means to an end. Big and strong enough to do what she asked of him, yes. Easily manipulated, certainly. Apparently, not as easily as she originally thought.

He hadn't worked fast enough to suit her, so, she'd taken things into her own hands. Now, her plan was totally screwed. Ah, but it had been a good one. Once they were in Atlanta, at Lenox, Andrea would've asked Lisa to walk out to the car with her. Lisa would have hesitated, asked Andrea 'why', cuz she's so pushy, and Andrea would have told her she wanted to put some packages in her trunk, but mostly wanted a chance to speak with Lisa alone. A chance to bare her soul to her new friend. Lisa would have bought it. Then as they walked across the parking lot, a strange van would've pulled up right in front of them. Lisa would be shoved in the opened door and the van would've sped off.

Andrea would then scream and cry and give the wrong description of the vehicle and the wrong license plate number and Lisa would be long gone, never to return. Easy. It would have been so easy. And now that spoiled, stupid, witch is at home, waiting for Chaz to come to her. Andrea's eyes narrowed, her jaw clenched. Then a light came on. Lisa's at home. Alone.

"I don't know, where do you want to eat lunch, Andrea?" Megan asked.

"Hmm? Lunch?"

Cindy laughed. "Yes, lunch. Earth to Andrea."

She shrugged. "Sorry. I was a little distracted. Actually, I'm not feeling very well."

"What's wrong?" Jodi asked.

"My stomach is just roiling. You know what, I think we need to stop and I'm gonna get a friend to come and pick me up."

"You're kidding? After all the trouble you went through to come along on our trip?" Cindy questioned.

"Sorry. I'm not sure what's wrong with me. I just know I don't want to end up puking all over the car."

"Yeah, and I'm pretty sure my parents feel the same way."

Andrea pulled out her cell. "I'll just call a friend. I'm sure he won't mind coming to get me."

Cindy shrugged nonchalantly. "Suit yourself."

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Lisa stared at the picture of Andrea standing by the lake with Marcus behind her. He had his arms around her, along her waist and

his chin resting on her shoulder. It seemed a little unnatural for a brother-sister type pose and looking at it gave her the creeps. She carefully replaced the silver-framed picture on the dresser.

The frustration of not having found any incriminating evidence yet was mounting. She'd covered the entire house, or most of it anyway. She'd been through every drawer, closet, and cabinet she could find. She'd looked under beds, rummaged through medicine cabinets and read mail. Andrea's room, though interesting, had turned up nothing. There had been several pictures of Chaz. It was sort of sad actually. Lisa shivered. There just had to be something here.

She wandered back down the stairs and back into what Lisa determined was Marcus' office. She'd read his appointment books and looked for secret compartments in the filing cabinets and drawers. Nothing. But there had to be something. She opened the desk drawer one more time. Nothing. Some postage stamps, pens, pencils, empty memo pads, push pins, fingernail clippers and a single key. Lisa lifted the key and examined it closely. Who knew what it went to? It could be anything.

It seemed to be a door key. Definitely not a car. Maybe a safety deposit box, but probably just a door. What door, though? If it was simply an extra key to some unimportant door why would Marcus have it placed so carefully in his desk drawer. Everything about him screamed obsessive compulsive. He wouldn't have just some unimportant key lying in his drawer. She took the key and walked out into the foyer, peering around for doors with locks.

She became extremely excited when she found a door with a lock in the hall just before the kitchen, but it was not locked and turned out to be a music control panel of some sort. Cursing under her breath, she was headed back to Marcus' office to replace the key when she spotted another door. It was made of the same dark wood as the paneling under the large front staircase. Lisa wouldn't have recognized it as a door at all if she hadn't noticed the small keyhole about waist high. Her heart began to pound.

Holding her breath she eased the key into the lock. Her heart raced when she saw it fit and turned easily. Biting her lip, she eased the door open. She was looking at a long staircase that went down about fifteen steps to a landing, turned and went farther down than she was able to see from her vantage point. She found a light switch and turned it on, slipped the key in her pocket and softly closed the door behind her. She immediately opened it again to make sure she would be able to get

back out. Smiling, she left the door open a crack and headed down the steps.

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Perfume bottles, a hand mirror, a crystal vase full of flowers and a book went flying off Lisa's dresser and crashed to the floor. Andrea stared down at the mess she'd made. She wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. Where was she? Where was that horrible red-headed woman that wouldn't go away? Had Chaz come and picked her up? Turning abruptly, she practically ran into Tuff. Tuff, the man she'd hired to take care of Lisa, didn't move.

"What are you staring at?" she yelled.

The man didn't flinch, however, one eyebrow rose as he spoke softly. "You need to watch how you speak to me, little girl. I'm not one of your minions."

"Well, what good are you if you can't even find the one I need you to kill."

He did flinch then. "I don't kill. I fulfill contracts."

"Whatever."

He shrugged. "Looks like it's a wash."

When she looked back at him he was gone. She ran down the stairs and out the back door shouting for him to wait for her, but as the back door slammed he was already speeding away. Sighing, she looked back at the door she'd just come out. She was gonna have to walk home now. Not that she hadn't done it before. She'd walked home from here many times. Usually through the woods.

She smiled as she thought of the day, not long ago, when that huge storm had moved through. She'd trailed Lisa. Lisa sensed her presence and took off running like a scared deer. Andrea had to stop herself from bursting out laughing. And then there was the time Chaz and Lisa rode Beebe and the stupid horse got spooked. She'd so hoped the horse would throw the both of them. No, she usually didn't mind the walk, it's just that today she was in no mood, after learning what Marcus had done, and then her plans to get rid of Lisa had fallen through. May as well get something to drink before she took off.

Once she was back inside though, she couldn't help herself, she went back up the stairs and this time into the room across from Lisa's. The room where Chaz had been staying. A pair of jeans and a T-shirt lay on the floor next to the bed. Reverently gathering up the clothing, she held it to her face and breathed deeply. Chaz.

Lying back on the bed, she held his clothing close and let his

essence surround her. Eyes closed she imagined him coming toward her. She knew he'd been staying here at Maddie's, but it had been in his own room, she thought happily. Though, he *was* staying in this room with that, that, evil red-headed person right across the hall. The idea of him and her together brought tears to Andrea's eyes. "Why can't you love me, Chaz?" she whispered. Her face hardened. I know why, she thought, it's because of Lisa.

Rising, she went to the dresser and stared in the mirror. There on top of the dresser was aftershave and a comb. Had to be Chaz's comb. She picked it up and ran it through her long dark hair. "Oh, Chaz, why can't you see, it's me you love. We were meant to be together."

Shuffling back into the bedroom across the hall she opened dresser drawers, flinging Lisa's lingerie across the room. Finally, in utter discomposure she fell face down on the bed and wept. When she quieted she sat up, realizing she had to get out of the house. She glanced down at the nightstand, noting one last drawer. As she slid it open the shiny metal of Lisa's gun caught her attention immediately.

"Well, well, what have we here," Andrea mumbled. "I'd better take this for safekeeping."

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"Holy freakin' jackpot," Lisa muttered.

The one room was big enough for a sound stage and set up like one as well. Main stage was a bedroom. Several large cameras were set around the bed, along with lighting and microphones. Lisa looked to the right, just past the cameras and saw a shelf lined with DVDs. Moving forward she began reading the titles. All of them were girl's names. There was a 'Becca,' 'Lauren,' 'Deb,' 'Jenny,' and 'Shanna." Lisa's brow furrowed. Wasn't Shanna the name of Andrea's friend she mentioned earlier today? Lisa felt sick.

What she saw next truly was sick. 'Andrea.' Lisa counted six DVDs with that name on it. "It couldn't be. It just couldn't be." Hands shaking, she removed one of the DVDs labeled 'Andrea,' looked for a place to load it, and spotted a laptop sitting on a nearby table. She went to it and started to load the DVD, but instead clicked on a folder on the desktop labeled Movies. Again, each file had a girl's name on it. She clicked on one labeled 'Andrea' and sank dumbfounded into a chair. Her stomach churned as she watched brother and sister performing for the camera. "Dear God," Lisa whispered in prayer. She quickly closed out the file, and clicked on a different one. Her arms crossed protectively across her heart as she watched Marcus having relations

with an unconscious girl. "Oh, no, no, no," Lisa chanted. Hands shaking she took out her phone and recorded a short video, capturing the essence of what was happening. She closed out the file and went to place the DVD she still held in her hand back into its jewel case and back in place on the shelf.

Moving quickly now, she began taking pictures of everything. First of the bed and cameras, then of the shelf of recordings, zeroing in on the girls' names.

She moved around the room, finding more and more to photograph. A large cork board covered with pictures of Marcus and Andrea in every compromising position one could possibly think of. "I'm gonna be sick," Lisa said softly.

"Bingo," she said as she came upon a metal work table. Two small amber colored plastic bottles with "Rohypnol" written by hand in black permanent marker sat side by side on the far back left corner of the table. On the far right corner sat a small bag of a brand name rat poison. The bag was open and had a small scoop sitting next to it. The table was fastidiously neat, keeping in line with Lisa's OCD diagnosis for Marcus. Snapping pictures as fast as she could, she had visions of presenting Chaz and Tyson with the evidence they needed to get that stupid warrant. Chaz will be mad, at first, but he'll get over it, she thought with a smile.

Finally, in the back corner was the most puzzling exhibit. A small wooden table sat against the wall. It was covered with candles, some that had burned down almost to nothing. In a large ornate frame was a newspaper clipping. Lisa bent down to read it. "Local Mother and Daughter killed by Drunk Driver." Under the caption was a picture of Cari and Julie Stewart when they were still alive.

There were other clippings laid out neatly covering the rest of the table and then some taped to the wall behind. Articles about the investigation. Pictures of the mangled car. Eyewitness accounts. Funeral notices. Stories about the grieving husband and father. Tears sprang to Lisa's eyes. Why? Why did Marcus have a memorial to Chaz's late wife and daughter? She didn't want to think of it. Not now. She just wanted to get out. Snapping several pictures of the little memorial, she stuffed the phone back in her pocket, turned quickly to leave and gasped. Andrea stood at the bottom of the steps.

"Scared ya, didn't I?" Andrea asked.

Andrea held Lisa's gun and it was pointed right at Lisa's chest. Lisa nodded. "Andrea, what are you doing here?"

"Ha, what a question coming from you."

"Listen, it's not what you think. I..."

"Don't even try it. I don't want to hear anything you have to say. You've been caught red-handed."

Lisa closed her mouth. The situation was volatile and she didn't want to upset the girl. This poor child had been molested by her older sibling for who knows how long. Somehow, Lisa just needed to gain her trust so she could help her.

Andrea waved the gun toward the bed. "Move over there and sit on the bed," she ordered.

Lisa obeyed and as she sat, and before she knew what was happening, Andrea snapped one side of a handcuff around Lisa's wrist. Lisa reacted instinctively, jerking her arm away from Andrea and rolling to the opposite side of the bed. She rose, ready to pounce on Andrea. No way was some skinny little messed up girl gonna be able to handcuff her.

Andrea had the gun pointed directly at Lisa. "Do you think I won't shoot?"

Lisa wanted to say that she was too much a coward to shoot her but she didn't want to tempt fate. "Look, Andrea, I'm not letting you handcuff me to the bed."

"You don't have a choice in the matter."

Lisa's eyebrows rose. "You won't get away with this."

"Wrong again. Now get over here and sit."

Lisa shook her head. "No way. If you think..."

The blast from the gun seemed louder than what Lisa remembered during her training. She staggered back, gripping her arm where the bullet entered. Blood oozed out between her fingers. Lisa looked up incredulously at Andrea. Though she'd been working on it since she and Chaz had started praying together, the curses flew out of her mouth. "You... shot me you little..." She slipped down onto the bed, suddenly dizzy and nauseated.

"One bullet left, Lisa. I promise I won't waste it." Andrea moved toward Lisa, grabbed her wounded arm that had the cuff attached to her wrist. Lisa cried out in pain.

"Hurts, does it?" Andrea asked sarcastically as she locked the other end of the cuff around the top rail of the headboard.

Breathing heavily with shock and pain, Lisa glared at Andrea. "What's your plan, Andrea? You can't keep me here forever."

Andrea smiled. "I have no intention of keeping you here. Don't

worry, you won't be here very long at all." She pulled out her cell phone. "Hey, Marcus... Yes, I know you're with clients, I just wanted to let you know I have a really wonderful surprise for you when you get home... You wish. Just hurry home, you'll see."

Lisa tried hard to blink back the tears that threatened. She was mortified when she tried to speak and her voice cracked with emotion. Nevertheless, she ventured on. "Andrea, I know about you and Marcus. I know how he's abused you all these years. I saw it on one of the files on the computer. I understand how you can have a false sense of loyalty to him."

Andrea burst out laughing. "Oh, Lisa, that's good. That is really just so good, but you are so very wrong. You've got it all mixed up. I'm the one in charge. Oh, I let Marcus think he's the big, bad, dude, but I'm the one pulling all the strings. I've got him wrapped around my little finger. I have for a long time now. I can get him to do anything for me. Anything."

Lisa leaned her head back against the wall, closed her eyes. How is she gonna get herself out of this? How long will it be before Chaz discovers she's gone? As if the thought of him caused it to happen, her cell phone rang.

Andrea leaped for her and wrestled the phone away and let it go to message, then waved the phone at Lisa.

"What's the password?"

"Go to hell."

Andrea smiled sweetly. "Aww, come on now, Lisa. It was Chaz. You know you want to hear what he had to say. Tell you what, you don't have to tell me the password. Just punch it in." She held the phone up next to Lisa's hand and waited.

It only took Lisa a second to admit that she wanted desperately to hear what Chaz had to say. She put in the code.

Grinning, Andrea played the message on speaker, holding the phone out so they could both hear.

"Hey, Red. I just spoke to John and he told me you stayed home with a headache. He also said you were gonna call me. Since you didn't I'm guessing you're still asleep. I'll check back with you later. I've been arguing with these guys all day. Looks like this is a waste of time. Anyway, I'll see you soon, babe. I love you."

Andrea recoiled at those last words, but hid her disgust. She tucked the phone back in her pocket. "Aww, how sweet."

Lisa only glared. She was queasy and light-headed and could think

of no response.

Andrea eyed her. "Remember when you got lost in the woods?"

Lisa closed her eyes.

"You got really scared. I know that because it was me. It took everything I had to keep from laughing."

When Lisa didn't react to that information, Andrea tried a different surprise. "I was gonna ask Marcus to take care of that stupid kitten for me, but I decided to do it myself."

Lisa opened her eyes, glared at the sick girl.

"Ya know, it wasn't hard at all. A little messy though."

A tear escaped. Lisa tried to wipe her face on her shoulder.

"Aww, it's okay," Andrea said, moving closer. "You'll soon be out of your misery."

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Chaz was headed to his car when Tyson stepped out, called him and motioned him back inside.

"What's up?" Chaz asked as he got to the door.

"Glen Truett just showed up. He says Marcus is the one who gave him the Rohypnol. We're working on the warrant now."

"How long will it take?"

Tyson shrugged. "Could take an hour, could take til morning."

"By morning the place will be clean."

"I think we'll get it sooner than later. Go home. I'll call you when it happens."

Chaz breathed a sigh of relief. Everything would be over soon. Then he and Lisa could get on with their lives. Just thinking about getting home to her, finding her all curled up in bed made him smile.

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Pain arced through her shoulder, but she only had the strength to give a soft moan. Andrea was shaking her. Lisa opened her eyes. It felt as if her arm was on fire.

"Wh– what are you gonna do?" Lisa asked.

"Now don't bother yourself about that," Andrea said. "You'll know soon enough. Marcus is almost home."

She stood up as she heard a door slam upstairs. "Oh good, that must be him now. You wait right here," she said with a giggle. She ran up the steps.

Marcus was already in his study, pouring a stiff drink.

"Hey," she said from the doorway.

He turned, smiled. "Hi, Andrea. So tell me, what's the surprise you

bought for me today?" He walked to his chair, sat down and pulled at his tie.

"Here, let me do that," Andrea purred. She leaned close, keeping her eyes on him as she removed his tie.

"You're in an awfully good mood," Marcus said. "Why?"

She took his hand. "You'll see. Come with me."

He gulped his drink and allowed her to pull him along. When they started down the steps, he sighed. "Andrea, how many times have I told you not to come down here when I'm not home."

"I had to. The door was open and I came down looking for you."

"The door was not open. I never leave it open."

"I know. I thought it was strange. When I got down the steps you'll never guess who I caught down in your room."

"Who?" Marcus asked, his voice rising in anger.

"Her," Andrea said as they entered the room.

Marcus stood, his mouth open. "What is she doing here?" He moved toward Lisa, bending over her. "What happened to her?"

"I shot her. I had to. She wouldn't do what I said."

He sighed, took Lisa by the hair, shook her. She opened her eyes.

"Marcus?"

His eyes narrowed. "You shouldn't have come into my home, Lisa." He turned back to his sister. "This isn't how it should be done, Andrea. I told you I'd take care of it."

"Well, you took too long. And I didn't ask her to come over here snooping around. She took pictures down here." She tossed him Lisa's phone.

He shook his head. "We certainly can't have anyone seeing those, now, can we?"

"Marcus," Lisa said weakly. "You have to know that people will know where I've gone."

He nodded with a slight smile. "Yes, they will, but when they come looking, there won't be a trace of you."

Lisa swallowed hard. "What are you gonna do?" she asked, hating the fear in her voice.

"Good question. Any suggestions, Andrea?"

"Drown her. In the lake."

He shook his head. "I don't like it. A body too close to the house. Too easily linked to us."

She shrugged. "Well, Marcus, that pickup you used in Cari's accident has been at the bottom of that lake for three years and no one

has ever come looking."

"No, oh no," Lisa whimpered. "Please, tell me it's not true."

Marcus turned his head slowly to gaze at her. "What? Oh, there's definitely a car in the lake. And yes, it's the one that ran Cari Stewart's car off the road."

"You, you killed Chaz's wife and daughter?" Lisa asked as tears ran down her face.

He drew a deep breath. "Easily. You, on the other hand, have proven to be quite a handful."

She began to violently struggle against the cuffs that held her to the headboard. It was futile. She knew it was futile, but the knowledge didn't keep her from trying. Finally, her energy spent, she stilled. "Why, Marcus? Why would you kill a woman and her baby? A, sweet, innocent, baby."

He looked at her as if he couldn't believe his ears. "For Andrea, of course."

Andrea smiled sweetly. "I told ya, Lisa. He'd do anything for me. I wanted Chaz. I needed Cari and Julie gone. Marcus took care of it. Simple and easy."

Lisa shook her head as she wept. "Dear God, dear God."

Andrea ignored her. "So, what do you think, Marcus? The lake?"

"I suppose so. I guess I have no choice. We have to get rid of her quickly. Someone is gonna come looking for her eventually. Probably tonight, but I'll have to move her again once we have a more workable plan. For now, grab the duct tape for me off that shelf over there," he ordered.

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Chaz muttered complaints as he came in the front door. She was supposed to keep the system armed. "Lisa!" he yelled as he ran up the steps. He threw open the door to her room. "Li..." His heart pounded. "What the hell?"

He immediately fumbled for his cell and called his brother. "Lisa's gone. Her room is trashed. I'm going over there right now, I don't give a crap about a warrant."

"I was just about to call you, anyway. We've got it. I'm on my way. Chaz, we'll find her. We will. Wait for me, Chaz."

"Yeah, right." He was out the door. He jumped in his jeep but instead of heading to the Winstead home he turned toward his own house and called John as he drove.

"Yo," John answered.

"Lisa's in trouble," Chaz said. "Tell me everything that happened. You said earlier that Andrea decided to join them?"

John filled Chaz in on Andrea's request to join them, Lisa's bid to stay home and Andrea's decision to stay behind once they were on the road. When Chaz told John what he'd found when he arrived home, John was devastated.

John let go a few expletives. "I should have called you, man. I should've known something was up."

"You can't read minds, John. First, you did call me. Second, I should've come home the minute I called her and she didn't answer. Who knows how long she's been gone. Oh dear Lord Jesus, I should've come home."

"Okay, okay, focus. I'm at least two hours away. It's all you."

"I'm headed to my house to get my piece cuz I'm gonna blow his head off."

"Well, bud, I wanna tell you that you need to calm down and think twice before you act, but I can't."

"John, what if I'm too late? What if I find him but she's not with him? What if he's already killed her and hidden her body?" He stopped, breathed.

John blew out a breath. "I'll call a friend and get a trace on her cell phone."

"John, lay on me some of your special forces stuff. How do I handle this?"

"If you find him and she's not with him, you can make him talk. Don't hit a main artery. Stay with hands and feet. Knees maybe. Don't go in there guns blazing. Don't let them know you're there at all. Go quietly. If you come across the girl, take her out of the picture. A well-placed uppercut should do it. Where's your brother?"

"He's on his way," Chaz answered as he charged up the stairs of his home and moved toward his dresser. Jerking open the bottom drawer he grabbed his Glock and two magazines, loading one and stuffing the other in his pocket.

"Okay, then, you don't have a lot of time to find Marcus and make him talk before the cops get there and do things by the book. Got it?"

Chaz climbed back into his jeep. "Got it."

"Go find her, man."

"On it," Chaz said as he tossed the phone onto the passenger seat. His hands shook. He will find her in time, he said to himself. Or he will die trying. His mind wanted to slip into grieving mode. He'd been in

that mode for so long, it came back easily. He shook it off. All her life Lisa had no one to depend on. No one to take care of her. He would not let her down now.

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Lisa's fingernails raked the side of Marcus' face as he wrestled with her. He cursed at her before he backhanded her, but the blow only slowed her down for a second. She fought like a wildcat.

"Will you help, please?" Marcus yelled at Andrea.

Andrea raised her chin and tried to decide what to do. The moment big brother had unlocked the handcuff from the headboard Lisa had swung her arm and knocked Marcus in the head with the dangling cuff. Pretty gutsy seeing as that was the arm that held a bullet. They'd rolled off the bed together and were now grappling across the floor. Andrea approached and delivered a swift kick to Lisa's forehead as she tried to crawl away. Lisa collapsed face down.

Marcus looked up at Andrea. "It's about time."

She shrugged. "I thought you might be able to handle her without my help."

"Just shut up and help," he answered as he rolled her over.

He grabbed her hands and held them together. "Start taping."

Andrea knelt and began winding duct tape around Lisa's arms from elbow to wrist. Lisa moaned as she woke and tried to resist. Andrea shook her. "Oh, will you just give it a rest," she spat.

Once they finished taping her arms they went to work on her legs, taping them from knees to ankles. Finally, they taped her already secured arms to her body. By the time they finished she looked like a silver mummy.

Lisa knew real fear. She was gonna die. Why did she think she could get away with sneaking in here? Her moment of bravery had turned to stupidity real quick. She'd thought to put all this trouble to rest, but the only thing being put to rest, was her. She couldn't think of anything to say that might sway them. They were already speaking to each other as if she didn't exist. That meant they already thought of her as dead. And they really did mean to kill her since they hadn't even tried to hide what they'd done to Cari and Julie.

She thought of Chaz and how hard this was gonna be for him. He'd just barely gotten past the grief of losing his family and now he would lose her too. Lord, but she hoped it didn't completely destroy him. And Grams and Dad. And Megan. Tears welled and overflowed.

Looking up, she caught Marcus' eye. Had she seen a shred of

compassion? She'd originally thought Marcus had seduced and manipulated his little sister, but it was evident that wasn't the case. Little sis was an evil monster. So her only hope was with Marcus.

"You don't have to do everything she says, Marcus."

"Shut up," Andrea barked.

"I'm not talking to you," Lisa answered.

That earned her a slap across the face. "You're dead! You're a dead woman," Andrea screeched.

Marcus pulled her away and set her aside. "We don't have time for this, Andrea," he said calmly.

"Marcus, you won't get away with this," Lisa continued. "They're gonna question you and Andrea. Do you really think she won't turn on you in a second if she thinks they may try to pin my murder on her?"

"Don't think you can turn us against each other," Marcus said. "There won't be any murder to try to pin on anyone because they won't have a body."

"I once thought you were halfway intelligent. They'll drag your lake, Marcus."

"By the time they do, you won't be there anymore. I'm gonna move your body as soon as I get past the first wave of people searching for you."

"So, are you gonna move the pickup too?" Lisa asked. "And who do you think is goin' down for the murder of Chaz's wife and daughter when they find that truck?"

Marcus ran a hand through his hair.

"Don't let what she says get to you, Marcus," Andrea said. "We have to stick together. She's tryin' to turn you against me."

Marcus looked down at Lisa, then turned and faced his sister. Making a decision he drew a deep breath.

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Leviticus 20:17

"If a man marries his sister, the daughter of either his father or his mother, and they have sexual relations, it is a disgrace. They are to be publicly removed from their people. He has dishonored his sister and will be held responsible."

Chapter 22

"Hand me the duct tape," Marcus said.

Grinning at Lisa, Andrea did as instructed. Marcus ripped off a large piece, grabbed Lisa by the hair and wrapped it around her mouth. "Aww, Marcus, I just knew you'd stand by me," Andrea said, rising up to kiss his cheek.

Marcus took her by the shoulders. "You know I'd do anything for you, Andrea, but now you have to do something for me."

"What do you want?"

"Promise me, this is it. No more. If Chaz still doesn't come to his senses after this you just need to accept it. We have each other. Who cares that the world doesn't understand? We'll go somewhere where nobody knows us. I'll take care of you, just like I always have."

Lisa thought she would be sick. What did it matter? Drowning in a lake or in her own vomit, she's dead either way. She wondered briefly if Chaz ever made it home and was looking for her, but the pain of that thought was too much to bear and she quickly pushed it from her mind.

Marcus pulled away. "Okay, sis, we really need to get a move on. Come on, I need your help. I'll carry her, you open doors. Oh, and grab those bloody sheets."

Lisa grunted as Marcus hefted her over his shoulder.

"We'll go straight to the lake, dump her in the skiff and I'll take her out. I'll need to gather some weights. No need for you to see something that may haunt you later."

"I can handle it," Andrea argued.

Lisa began to buck, jerking her body back and forth. When Marcus came close to losing his balance at the top of the stairs he set her down and got in her face.

"I can get the Roofie and put you out of your misery right now or I can leave you alert. It's up to you. Either way, you're goin' down. The question is, are you a coward or do you want to see it coming?"

Her eyes blazing into his, she screamed obscenities at him through the tape that covered her mouth.

He ripped the tape off. "Have you made a decision?"

"You're the coward you idiot. Too scared to stand up to your baby sister. Too horny to see that she's a monster. Do you think she cares about you? She doesn't. All she cares about is manipulating you to do what she wants. She told me before you came home. She said she's got

you wrapped..."

The kick from Andrea forced the air from her lungs briefly, but she drew a breath and forced herself to go on. "Why would you do this for her, kill me for her, when she doesn't intend to be with you? She doesn't love you. She loves Chaz."

The hands closed around her throat quickly, cutting off the air. Lisa closed her eyes. So, she wouldn't drown. She was gonna die right here. But just as that thought came into her mind, something stronger replaced it. A strong, calm, penetrating voice said, "Speak daughter, remember the miracles and tell my sheep." Lisa blinked. There was no mistaking what she heard. A feeling of calm and peace filled her being. Yet, Marcus' hands were still squeezing the life from her body. Amazingly, it was Andrea who saved her.

"Marcus, you're the one that said we needed to hurry. I think I heard something. Let's get moving."

He let go and the air rushed back into her lungs. Taking great gulps of air, Lisa struggled to speak, again. She knew, felt absolutely positive, that getting through to Marcus was what she must do.

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Chaz left the jeep outside the gate and made his way to the house. Marcus' BMW was in the circular drive in front. He glanced inside it as he passed to check for signs of Lisa's abduction. Nothing. Moving swiftly to the front door he slowly turned the knob. The door opened and Chaz stepped inside. The house was silent. A door under the large front staircase was ajar and Chaz moved toward it. He glanced down at something gray on the floor. It was a piece of duct tape. His heart jumped into his throat when he realized the tape had long red hairs stuck to it. He pocketed the tape, pulled his weapon and moved silently down the steps.

The room was empty. His stomach lurched when he realized the setup. What had they done to her and was she still alive? The bed had been stripped. A lone pillow lay on the floor next to the bed and next to it was a mostly used roll of duct tape. He lifted the pillow and found it smeared with blood. He flew up the steps.

A glance toward the kitchen showed a patio door left open. Chaz eased his way outside. The only thing keeping his fury in check was the fear. The fear that he was too late. The fear she was already gone. The fear of what she had suffered. The fear of another funeral. "Please, dear Lord Jesus," he whispered. The moment he said those words everything changed.

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Andrea grunted as she gave a last-ditch effort to push the skiff into the water. She stood, wiping her hands on her slacks. "I can't move it. You're gonna have to put her down and do it."

With a sigh Marcus dropped Lisa on the ground near the shore of the small lake.

Lisa cursed, rolling over onto her back. "You didn't have to drop me so hard. I'm gonna get you for this. Both of you. If not in this life then I'll come back and haunt you. You can count on it."

"Will you just shut up!" Andrea screamed.

"No. I won't. You're gonna hear my voice in your dreams or, should I say, nightmares. You're gonna, umph..." Lisa grunted as Andrea kicked her in the side.

"Shut up!" Andrea yelled again.

Marcus finished pushing the skiff into the water. "Come here and hold the boat while I get her in."

Andrea did as instructed, wading out ankle deep, while Marcus hefted Lisa back up onto his shoulder.

"Hold it right there."

Two heads snapped around to find Chaz standing just ten feet away, beside a pine tree, his weapon trained on Marcus' chest.

"Chaz?" Lisa said, her voice breaking as she tried to twist around to see what was happening.

"Yes, baby. It's me. Everything's gonna be okay."

His voice was strong and calm and Lisa's heart rejoiced.

"Put her down," Chaz ordered.

Marcus dropped her again and held his hands up.

"Umph, stupid idiot," Lisa mumbled.

"Don't do anything drastic, Chaz," Marcus pleaded.

Chaz's sarcastic reply was interrupted by Andrea.

"Put the gun down," she ordered.

Chaz's eyebrows rose as he took in the situation. Andrea had what looked to be Lisa's gun pointed at him. Of course, he had no intention of putting his gun down and giving her the advantage.

"Can't do that, Andrea," Chaz said. "I'm holding a semiautomatic weapon. You don't stand a chance. You need to put the gun down while you still can."

"Shoot him," Marcus yelled.

Andrea looked nervously at Marcus then back to Chaz. "Chaz, you need to put the gun down."

"Not gonna happen."

"Shoot him, Andrea!" Marcus yelled again.

"She won't shoot him, Marcus," Lisa said calmly. "You know she's in love with him."

"Don't bet on that," Andrea warned.

"Then shoot him," Marcus begged. "Prove where your loyalties lie. I've taken care of you your whole life, haven't I?"

"Oh, yeah, Marcus, you've taken real good care of her— in bed," Lisa prodded.

"Shut your mouth," Andrea screamed at Lisa. She pointed the gun at Lisa, making Chaz move forward, but Andrea noticed and aimed the gun back at Chaz.

Chaz's eyebrows shot up again. "So, whaddya sayin' Lisa? They're a couple of sickos?"

"You don't know the half of it," Lisa returned.

Andrea looked into Chaz's eyes. "It's not like that. Really. Don't listen to that stuff."

"That's a lie, Chaz," Lisa said, hoping to drive Andrea to distraction. "It's exactly like that. They've got movies of it."

"Shut up," Andrea screamed pointing the gun back toward Lisa.

Chaz was able to get a few feet closer before she pinned him with the gun again.

"That's not the way it was, Chaz," Andrea said. "It was him. He– he forced me. Ever since I was a kid. He, he– raped me."

Marcus gasped. "Andrea, after all I've done for you, I can't believe you're gonna turn on me. That's not the way it was and you know it." Marcus' voice became thick with emotion. "I loved you, Andrea. You know I did. I did everything you asked. I gave you everything you wanted. Andrea, shoot him. He's gonna kill me. You have to shoot him."

"Andrea, put the gun down," Chaz said softly. "You don't want to shoot me. You don't want to shoot anybody. And I don't want to either. You put your gun down and I'll put mine down and we'll work this whole thing out."

She looked over at her brother, then back to Chaz. Oh how she loved him. With all her heart. She'd loved him for so long now. How could he not see? How could he not love her back? How could Marcus ask her to shoot him knowing how she felt about him? And Marcus had tried to kill Chaz just last night against her specific orders. She was losing control of Marcus. And she certainly didn't feel about him like

he felt about her. He was a means to an end, and he was becoming a real obstacle, a bother, a problem.

"She doesn't love you, Marcus," Lisa continued her verbal onslaught. "She's been using you all these years. She loves Chaz. She'll never be with you once she has Chaz."

"That's not true," Marcus said, blubbering now. "She does love me. We just can't let the rest of the world know." He took a step toward Andrea. "Shoot him. You have to shoot him. He's been nothing but trouble for us. Look at him, Andrea. He doesn't love you. He'll never love you. Especially now that he knows about us."

"Don't say that," Andrea said softly.

"It's true. He's proven it over and over. First by marrying Cari. And once she was gone did he come to you? No. He went after someone else. Not you, Andrea. He'll never love you. Never."

She turned toward Marcus, yet kept the gun pointed at Chaz. "I told you not to say that," she cried out.

"I have to say it. Even if we had managed to get rid of Lisa, he never would've turned to you. Never. He doesn't love..."

Earlier, inside the house, when Andrea had fired the gun, it had been amazingly loud to Lisa. This time it seemed to emit only a small pop. Lisa gasped and Chaz's jaw clenched as the small red spot in the middle of Marcus' chest grew larger and larger and he sank to the ground next to Lisa.

Chaz turned his weapon on Andrea. "Put it down," he said softly.

"There's no more bullets," Lisa said quickly.

"Don't move," Tyson's voice called from behind Chaz.

"I'm just gonna lay my gun down," Chaz said, slowly lowering his weapon. He tossed it on the ground.

"Drop the gun," Tyson said. Chaz turned, realizing Tyson and three other deputies thought Andrea could shoot at any moment.

"Don't shoot her. It's not loaded," Chaz told them. "The girl's a mess, Tyson. She just shot her own brother."

"We saw," Tyson answered.

"He's gone," one of the deputies muttered softly as he knelt next to Marcus.

Chaz went immediately to Lisa.

Two deputies took Andrea into custody as she screamed obscenities at Lisa and pleaded for Chaz to love her. Chaz knelt beside Lisa, pulled his pocketknife and began cutting through the tape. "Lisa, you've been shot."

"Yes, I know," she said weakly. "I wouldn't cooperate with Andrea so the little brat shot me. And at the risk of being thought a wimp I have to say, I'm not feeling so good."

"You've lost some blood. I gotta get you to the hospital. I guess that's how you knew there were no more bullets."

"Yeah, I'm a genius aren't I?" She gave a slight chuckle which a few seconds later turned into tears.

"Okay, sweetheart, it's gonna be okay," he comforted.

When she didn't stop he teased her. "You were doing so good, being so brave. It's over. All over. Why are you crying now?"

"I thought I'd never see you again," she whimpered. "I'm just so happy to look into your face, to hear your voice. I love you so much, Chaz, and I'm just so happy you're here. Chaz, God spoke to me. It's like He let me know everything was gonna be okay."

"Me too," Chaz said softly. He smiled. "Isn't it a wonderful thing, to know God is mindful of us?"

She nodded. "God knew I was scared. I really thought I was about to die. I was so scared."

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight against his chest. "I understand exactly what you're saying. The terror I felt wondering what Marcus had done to you, wondering if you were even still alive, wondering if I'd be able to make him talk if I found him and you weren't with him."

"I'm sorry, Chaz. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. What I'm saying is, God let me know you were okay. He took away my fear. You don't have to apologize. It's not your fault. You don't have to apologize for someone taking you against your will and bringing you here and..."

"Bringing me here? What makes you say that?"

He stroked her hair back from her face. "Well, when I got home and found your room trashed I knew he..."

"My room is trashed?"

Chaz' brow creased. "Yes, it is and I'm thinkin' that maybe you'd better tell me what happened."

"I, uh, I thought it would be a good time, you know? While Andrea was out shopping with the girls and Marcus was in Savannah with clients, I thought I'd sneak in over here and get the evidence we needed to stop all this mess."

He was silent.

"Chaz?"

"So you're telling me that you came here on your own?" His voice was not so comforting now.

Too ashamed to look him in the eye she kept her head down. "Um, so, yes, Chaz, that's what I did."

"I ought to throttle you within an inch of your life."

She rested her head against his chest. "I'm a little used up right now. Could you schedule it for another time?"

He sighed, took a moment. "John said Andrea opted out of the shopping trip before they ever got to Atlanta. So I'm guessing she's the one who broke into your room."

Lisa shrugged. "That must be how she got my gun."

Tyson knelt down next to Chaz. "How is she?"

"She'll make it. She's got a bullet in her."

"Ambulance is on the way. Coroner's coming for Marcus. I'm afraid he's gone. Was your gun fired?"

"No."

"Tyson," Lisa said softly. "I came here on my own. I was gonna get the evidence you needed to clear up everything."

He sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. "I ought to turn you over my knee."

"You'll have to stand in line," Chaz said.

"Will the two of you stop being so macho for a second and listen. As I was saying, Tyson, there's a basement room. It's full of evidence. The Rohypnol, rat poison, and videos."

"Videos?"

"Of Marcus with girls, and it's bad. I mean, it looks like the girls are under the influence of something."

"Okay. We'll take care of it," he said, shaking his head at the evil confronting them. He stood as paramedics arrived with a gurney.

Tim nodded at Chaz who scooped Lisa up and placed her gently on the gurney. Tim smiled at Lisa. "We gotta stop meeting like this."

"Tell me about it," she mumbled.

"Gunshot wound," Chaz said. "Small caliber, she's light-headed from blood loss."

"We'll get her to the ambulance and start an IV."

A deputy approached at the same time, nodding at Tyson and Chaz. "Sheriff wants to speak to both of you."

Chaz nodded. He and Tyson followed as they wheeled Lisa around the house and to the front drive where the ambulance waited.

"Wait," Lisa said just as they were about to lift the gurney into the

ambulance. "Tyson, can I speak to you, please. Alone."

Tyson's brow furrowed. "Uh, Chaz, go on and see what Sam wants. Tell him I'll be right there."

"Got it," Chaz said, glancing anxiously toward Lisa.

Tyson leaned down, brushed some wisps of hair out of Lisa's face. "What can I do for you, brave lady?"

She heaved a sigh. "Tyson, I need to tell you something. I didn't know how to tell Chaz. You'll have to do it."

"Is this something that just can't wait?"

"It can't wait. There's a vehicle in the lake. A white pickup. It's the one that caused the accident that killed Cari and Julie. It wasn't an accident, Tyson. Marcus did it. He killed them—for Andrea."

Tyson stood dumbfounded, speechless, shocked. As the information sank into his brain, he shook his head and tears filled his eyes. "It can't be."

"I know," Lisa said, sniffling. "I know it's hard, but they told me all about it. Sort of bragged about it. I guess they figured I wouldn't be around to tell anyone. Andrea wanted Chaz, and Marcus would do anything for her. They had a, relationship."

"Who had a relationship? Marcus and Andrea? You're saying they were incestuous?"

She nodded.

"Geez." He stood straight and looked over at his brother.

"Are you gonna tell him now?"

Tyson looked back down at Lisa. "Like you said, it can't wait."

Lisa was lifted up into the ambulance. She craned her neck to watch Tyson as Tim worked to insert an IV into her arm. Tyson approached Chaz, took him by the arm and pulled him aside. As he spoke she could see Chaz's shoulders slump. For several moments it was the only sign that Tyson was delivering terrible news. She watched as Chaz finally pressed the heel of both hands against his eyes, then gripped his head and stared up into the heavens. Finally, he let his arms fall loosely to his sides.

Tyson placed his hands on Chaz's shoulders. Chaz leaned forward and the two brothers stood together, foreheads touching as Tyson spoke softly.

"Bro, I know these last three years have been hard on you. And I understand what this news means, how it makes you feel, but Chaz, no matter how they died, or why, they're still gone. I've always looked up to you, Chaz. You're the best big brother in the world, and there's

nothing I wouldn't do for you. Just tell me what you want me to do and I'll do it. But you have to do something for me too."

When Chaz didn't answer Tyson went on. "You have to put this behind you. Lisa needs you now. You've been doing a great job of pulling yourself out of the funk you've been in for three years. Don't fall back in now."

Chaz stood completely still, gazing into his brother's eyes. Neither man moved as several tears welled and fell over Chaz's cheeks. He made no attempt to brush them away. Finally, he drew a breath and stepped back, nodded. "I won't fall back now. At least, I don't think I will. You're right, Lisa needs me, and I'll hold onto that and to her, to get through this."

Tyson smiled at him. Offered his hand.

Chaz grabbed it and pulled his little brother close for a hug. "Thanks, bro."

"I got your back, always," Tyson said.

"I know you do. And I got yours." He turned abruptly.

Lisa watched as Chaz approached the ambulance.

"I got it, Tim," Chaz said. "You take the front."

Tim climbed out. "That would be my pleasure."

Chaz climbed in. His eyes were red, but he was smiling at her. "How are you feeling?"

"I'll be okay. What about you?" she asked warily.

He nodded. "Same here."

His strong hand cupped her face. "I love you, Red."

"And I you," she answered softly as his mouth covered hers.

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Hebrews 12:2-3

"Fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer, and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him, he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

✝✝✝

"One of the really good things about living out here in the woods is no one can hear you scream," Chaz laughed as he wrestled Lisa down to the sofa.

"Yeah, well, one of the bad things is it will be hard for the ambulance to make it through to pick up the pieces when I get through kickin' your butt," Lisa threatened.

"You and who else?"

She laughed. "Ya think you're so big and strong," she began and slyly changed direction. "And the thing is, Chaz, you are, and I love that you are. It's refreshing after living in a city filled with men who don't know what it means to be a man."

He sighed and let her up to sit next to him on the couch. "That's dirty fighting, Lisa, and you know it."

She giggled. "Whatever it takes. And it worked."

He put a finger under her chin, as he often did, lifted her face and kissed her softly. "So tell me, what does it mean to be a man?"

She looked around the beautiful room as if searching for the answer. "Well, a man is a bunch of contradictions. He's strong. And that doesn't necessarily mean physically strong, though that helps, but I mean he has confidence."

"And the contradiction to that is, he is also weak?"

"Silly. No, the contradiction is that no matter how strong he is, he knows he can't do everything by himself. He knows when to ask for help. So he's confident, yet humble. He's in charge, yet he steps back and allows someone else to take over. He knows what he wants, and goes after it, but if he doesn't know what he wants, he actively tries to figure it out."

"This perfect guy sounds complicated."

She laughed. "I didn't say he was perfect, but he's pretty close." She squeezed his hand. "Seriously, Chaz, I've been here a year now and a lot has happened and you and I have grown so much and I think most of that has happened ever since we accepted Cari's challenge to reach out to Jesus."

Chaz nodded in agreement.

Lisa went on. "I mean, God has shown us that He's real. And I love the fact that you, Chaz, a big strong man, acknowledges His realness. That a big strong man can get down on his knees every day

with me so that we can pray together, and well, I've learned that there's nothing more attractive than a Godly man. I didn't use to know that was attractive, but I'm so glad I've learned. These prayer sessions have been the highlight of my day. I look forward to them each day. They bring me such comfort."

Chaz took her hand, raised it to his mouth and kissed it gently. "I also look forward to our time of prayer. I'm grateful to know there really is something beyond our earthly selves. I'm grateful that God has shown us the miracle of His existence. I'm grateful for the gift Jesus gave us, and I give you my word, Lisa, that I will continue to try every day to be worthy of that gift."

Lisa sighed with a smile. "The cool thing, Chaz, is that you don't have to be worthy. You can make mistakes."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean I shouldn't try to be the best I can be." He sighed, looked around at his surroundings. "You know, this house used to be a prison of pain for me. Now, it's comfort and love—and beauty, thanks to your excellent design skills."

"I'm glad you like it."

He glanced at his watch. "Well, let's get this over with."

She leapt off the sofa but just as quickly he grabbed her and pulled her back down.

"Let me up."

He grinned. "No way. It's your birthday, and you *are* gonna get your birthday spankings."

She struggled to get away.

"You know, I promised last year to throttle you good for what you pulled when you snuck into the Winsteads' house."

"Oh, come on, Chaz," Lisa whined. "Isn't there some sort of statute of limitations?"

He stilled. "Maybe."

She smiled at him. She loved him in a way she could not express and she knew he loved her. She'd known him one whole year. One whole incredible year and she was grateful for each and every day she had to spend with him. So grateful. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, come on, I didn't even hit you yet. Why are you crying?"

"I don't know why I'm crying. It's just that, I'm just so grateful. So glad I came to Georgia to find my home. So glad I found you. So glad I found God. Last year on my birthday, I couldn't have been sadder. This year, I don't think I could be any happier."

He kissed her softly. "Yes you can. Come on, we're gonna be late

for your birthday dinner."

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Every time Lisa approached the *Pine Forest Inn* the feelings of pride and love overwhelmed her. It had been beautiful the very first time she'd laid eyes on it, but now, it was spectacular. The new front porch, now much larger and brighter with a row of white rocking chairs, and beautiful hanging baskets was surrounded by gardens. Azalea bushes lined the house. Two new magnolia trees stood at the driveway entrance, which was now a pillared stone entrance with a large, iron gate. The privacy fence was gone so that people approaching could see the beautiful Inn and its grounds.

"I love this place," she said to Chaz as they pulled in.

"It's a good thing since it belongs to you."

She smiled. "It's so sweet for Grams to have a birthday dinner for me. I wonder if Jodi and John and the baby will be home."

Chaz shrugged. "We'll know in a second."

Lisa's cell phone went off. Frowning at the number, she sighed heavily, rolled her eyes and answered and put it on speaker so she wouldn't have to repeat the conversation to Chaz.

"What?"

"Is that any way to speak to me?"

"Let's see, the last time you spoke to me you were in bed with my fiancé, so, yeah, that's how I will speak to you; without respect."

"I see. So Lisa, I guess that means that you haven't changed at all. You're still an emotional fireball?"

"Oh, I've changed all right, Mother dearest."

"How many times have I told you not to call me 'mother'?"

"Here's the funny thing, Mother, I'll call you whatever I want. You don't own me and you have absolutely no control over me or over the words that I speak. I realize that's become a thing nowadays, trying to tell people what words they have to use, but it won't work with me anymore."

"Crossing me is not a smart thing to do, Lisa, besides, I only called you to wish you a happy birthday."

Lisa made an unladylike noise in her throat. "You're the only one I know who can threaten someone and wish them a happy birthday in the same breath. As far as the threat, get this in your head, Mother, you don't frighten me. I'm not intimidated by you at all. As far as the birthday wish, I appreciate you trying to act like a decent person by calling to wish your only daughter a happy birthday. All I can say is

thank you and keep up the good work."

"The good work?"

"Yeah. Who knows, maybe one day you'll get your priorities all straightened out and you'll know what's really important in this world. Until then, I wish you only good things. Really, I wish you hard lessons but good things. Take care."

"Wait."

"What now?"

"I think you're gonna want to be involved in my life again, very soon," Louise stated.

"I'm not so sure about that."

"I think you will, Lisa. You see, I'm going to have a baby."

Lisa's mouth dropped open.

"Hello?"

"I'm still here," Lisa said slowly.

"What do you have to say?"

"I say I hope you learn some of those hard lessons before your child is born."

"That's it?"

"No, I have a question. Who's the father?"

"What does it matter?"

"It matters a lot, Mother."

"I don't see how."

"And that's one of the lessons you need to learn. A child needs both parents in their life. So, who's the father?"

Louise sighed. "His name is Anton Wolfe. He's an attorney. He's nothing, a nobody."

"Have you told him you're carrying his child?"

"Of course not. Why would I do that? Regardless of what you say, I have no need for him."

"You have so much to learn, Mother. Maybe you don't need him, but your child will."

"Nonsense."

"Listen, think about why you called me in the first place. It was not to wish me happy birthday. It was because you felt the need to speak to a family member. Like it or not, you need family. And I hope you remember, Mother, that when it seems like it's the end of the world, there's always home and family, waiting for you here. Even me, Mom. I'm waiting for you to call me and speak civilly to me and care about what I'm doing. But even more, I'm waiting for you to call *your* mother

and speak with kindness and respect to her. I forgive you, Mom. I really do. I pray God will touch your stone-cold heart."

"Oh, I see now. You've let all that religion stuff get to you down there in the Bible belt. You do know how silly that is, right?"

"God has shown me that He is real. I cannot deny it. I hope one day you will reach out to Him. And now, I have to go."

Before Louise could say anything else, Lisa hung up. She stared at the phone.

"I can't believe what I just heard," Chaz said softly.

Lisa looked up, smiled. "What a mess."

"Okay, well, it's interesting."

"Yeah, and terrifying."

"You did good, Lisa. Maybe she'll do better this time around."

"The thing is," Lisa said with a frown. "I won't be able to sit back and not intervene on behalf of my sibling. I'll have to do the right thing."

"I would expect nothing less," he said as he helped her from the car. "We have a little time to figure it all out. Come on, let's go in."

They walked up the porch steps and opened the door.

"Surprise!"

Lisa drew in a startled breath, her hand flying to her chest to calm her heart. "Oh, you guys! How could I not have seen this coming? I can't believe this. I should've known."

"Well, we asked Chaz to keep you occupied. Looks like mission accomplished," Jodi said.

"You da man," Troy yelled out.

"I do what I can," Chaz said with a grin.

"Yeah, I bet it was a tough job," Josh said.

"Let's get them inside and get this party started," Tyson ordered.

Everyone quieted as Maddie approached, stood on her tiptoes and took Lisa's face in her hands. "Granddaughter, this is the very first time I've ever been able to say this to you. Happy Birthday, dear. I am so very glad you were born. And I'm so very happy you decided to come home."

Lisa bent down and the two embraced. When she stood, her father and sister and step-mother stepped forward. "Let me add to what your grandmother just said," Joe began.

"Sometimes, when you're young, you make mistakes. That's what I thought when I got your mother pregnant. But God turns things from bad to good, because now that I've met you, and come to know you and

the strong, smart, brave, wonderful person that you are, I realize it was no mistake. It was one of the best things I've ever done, creating you. And we too, me and Shirley and Megan, we too are so very grateful you came looking for home. We feel complete now that you're part of our lives. Happy birthday, daughter."

"Group hug," Megan cheered as the family circled up.

Lisa was ushered to a place of honor in the large front room as everyone grabbed pre-dinner cocktails. Chaz brought Lisa white wine and kissed her cheek. Lisa looked around at the crowd, noting Chaz's parents and siblings, and then flew to her feet as her eyes met the older woman's across the room. "Dolly?"

The woman nodded and moved forward, hands outstretched.

"Dolly, I can't believe you're here," Lisa exclaimed.

"Not just me," Dolly laughed. "I brought my daughter to keep me company. And Bill and his wife and Hank and his wife are here too."

Lisa clapped and squealed like a little girl at the circus. "You're kidding!" she exclaimed as she hugged the woman and her daughter.

"Nope, she's not kidding," Bill said as both he and Hank stepped forward to greet Lisa.

"How?" Lisa stopped, her throat clogged with emotion.

"Your sweetie flew us in," Dolly offered. "He said you spoke of us often enough and he wanted to personally thank the people who were responsible for talking you into coming home."

Lisa turned and threw her arms around Chaz's neck. "Oh, Chaz," she cried. "Thank you for this!"

He looked up grinning. "Guess I did good."

"Definitely points for you, bro," Tyson called out.

Lisa smiled at Dolly. "How long are you staying? Oh, no, Jodi said the Inn was full. We have to find a place for you to stay, at least a few days."

"The Inn *is* full," Jodi said. "With them. Come on, Lisa, what kind of joint do you think I run around here?"

Lisa giggled. "Oh, this is just too good. Thank you everyone." Lisa leaned back against Chaz as he ran his warm hands up and down her arms.

Chaz's parents stepped forward next. "Happy birthday, Lisa," Patricia Stewart said softly, taking her hands and kissing her cheek.

"Thank you, ma'am," Lisa answered.

"Hey, little girl," Charles said. "When you gonna stop being so formal around us? You won us over a long time ago."

Lisa blushed. "Sorry. It just comes naturally, you know, to be very polite to the parents of the man I'm in love with."

"That's very sweet dear," Patricia said. "But we'd like you to think of us as family. We certainly think of you that way."

"We sure do," Cindy said, stepping forward. "Happy birthday, Lees," Cindy quipped. "Wait 'til you see what my parents got you. You're gonna freakin' love it."

"Cindy Lou, will you please go find something helpful to do," her mother said firmly.

"Sure," Cindy laughed.

"Where's Steph?" Lisa asked.

"Hot date," Tyson offered as he joined the group. "She told me to tell you 'happy birthday'."

"Thanks," Lisa said.

Tyson took her hands. "Very happy birthday, Lisa. And thanks for making my brother happy."

"That is my absolute pleasure," Lisa said softly.

"Hey, girl," Evan said, approaching with a pretty young thing on his arm. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks, Evan," Lisa replied with a smile.

"This is Brittany."

"Hi, Brittany," Lisa said. "Thanks for coming."

"My pleasure," Brittany said, her eyes turning up to look dreamily at Evan.

Chaz smiled.

"Get out of the way," Troy and Josh yelled as they approached with a tray of shot glasses in hand.

"One shot," Troy prodded, offering the tray to Chaz then turned to Lisa. "You too, girl."

"Before dinner?" Lisa asked, her eyebrows raised.

"Appetizure," Josh asserted, sloppily.

"I think you've already had a few appetizers," Chaz laughed.

"Maybe one or two," Josh confirmed.

"What's a few appetizers among friends," Troy offered. He passed out a full shot glass to everyone.

"What are we drinking?" Lisa asked, eyeing the glass.

Chaz bent, sniffed. "Jäger," he answered.

Lisa wrinkled her nose. "Okay, just one, since it's my birthday."

They held their glasses high. "To the hottest little redhead I've ever seen," Josh said loudly, "other than Megan," he added quickly.

"Happy birthday, and many more."

"Hear, hear," the crowd cheered.

The little group turned their glasses up. Brittany sputtered and got laughed at in return. Evan took her away to find her something more pleasant to chase it with, while Troy and Josh went in search of more booze.

"That stuff burns," Lisa said as Chaz pulled her close.

Chaz chuckled. "Well, you were very manly about it," Chaz said. "You didn't even wince."

Lisa smiled. "So glad I could make you proud of me."

John and Jodi approached with little Jake. "Come see Aunt Lisa," Jodi cooed, as she held out her fat two-month old.

The dark haired little boy grinned and went willingly to her. Lisa grunted as she took him and bounced him. "You are getting so big, little Jake." She held him close and made all kinds of silly baby-like sentences. "That's my big boy, yes it is, such a big boy, and so pretty just like your momma, and you're so big, like your daddy, yes you are, little Jake."

Chaz leaned down close to her ear. "I love you, Lisa. You making those baby sounds, that is hot."

Lisa grinned up at him. "I love you too, Chaz, oh yes I do, and you too are such a big boy!"

"Oh, yes I am," he agreed.

Lisa giggled.

"Happy birthday, kiddo," John said. He kissed her cheek.

Jodi hugged her. "Love ya like a sis," she said. "Happy birthday."

"Thanks you guys. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't decided to come out here."

"We're glad we came. We feel like we've come home too, Lisa. Sometimes, things are just meant to be."

"I think you're right," Lisa said as Maddie stepped out and called everyone into dinner.

Lisa was seated in the place of honor at the head of the huge dining table with Chaz by her side. Maddie had outdone herself with a wilted lettuce salad, Chicken Marsala over a bed of creamy noodles, confetti vegetables, big, fluffy yeast rolls and over on the buffet sat the biggest chocolate birthday cake Lisa had ever seen.

As everyone ate and conversed Lisa looked over the faces of the people she'd come to love so much. She was so glad that she had listened to Dolly and Bill and Hank and come home to find her roots.

She'd never known a home. She'd never known real love and care. It amazed her still, how other people, other families, spoke to each other, treated each other, interacted with each other. Everyone here had shown her how it's supposed to be. They'd stood by her when times got rough, even back when they'd barely known her.

She peered around at their animated faces. Each so different. Each so wonderful. They'd all been over here at the Inn as it was renovated, doing what they could to help. They weren't afraid of hard work. Seemed to thrive on it. And now the Inn was a masterpiece. Completely landscaped with award winning gardens. Lisa glanced out the three sets of French doors that led out of the dining room to a large veranda. They'd already been featured in two major design magazines not to mention the travel mags. *Pine Forest Country Inn and Cottages* was the place to go, touted as having some of the best southern style cuisine in the country. Maddie was overjoyed.

The attic had been made over into a beautiful home for John and Jodi and little Jacob. Their new family was certainly thriving. John and Jodi seemed to be in their element.

Lisa had originally thought she'd make herself an apartment in the attic too, since it was so large, but instead, she was staying in one of the downstairs bedrooms. She wanted to be closer to the action and also be available. She'd become more involved in learning about the running of the Stewart ranch. He'd taught her to ride and she rode with him every morning, helping to take care of a few of the myriad of chores of running a family ranch.

Lisa helped Chaz to completely decorate his home. Now, instead of a sparse house, with nothing to remind Chaz of his previous life, there was a warm, inviting retreat, filled with memories of the love Chaz and Lisa shared.

Chaz hadn't had an episode in almost nine months and Lisa was grateful for that. The last one had been triggered by the makeshift memorial in the Winstead's basement. It had been a hard pill to swallow that Cari and Julie had died because of the whim of a sick little girl and in Chaz's opinion, her even sicker brother.

Andrea's insanity defense hadn't worked and just a month ago, she'd been sentenced to life in prison with a possibility of parole in twenty-five years. Glen Truett had also been tried and found guilty. He however, got off on probation and community service. Lisa shook her head. She needed to think only of the happy things tonight. And she was happy. Oh, so happy. She didn't think she could be happier.

Chaz took her hand, raised it to his mouth. Their eyes met. Such love. He tapped his knife on his water glass and the table fell silent. Except, Lisa noted, for Cindy and Megan who were giggling and holding their phones up as if they were recording.

Chaz stood. So, Chaz was gonna make a birthday speech, Lisa thought. How sweet. She turned toward him, looked into his eyes, wanting to grasp every word and embed it in her memory.

"Everyone here has expressed to Lisa just how glad they are that she came home to Georgia. Everyone but me. And I'm inclined to believe that I'm more grateful than any of you. Before Lisa came here I was in a world of hurt. Some of you knew that, even though I tried to keep it hidden. Then some silly red-headed girl walked into the middle of my cattle crossing and my whole world tipped upside down. She took me by storm. I never stood a chance.

"I'm saying now that I'm the luckiest man in the world, to have loved not one but two wonderful, sweet, beautiful women. And I'm lucky for the few short years I had to spend with my beautiful baby girl. I'm lucky and grateful." He looked up at the sniffle that came from his mom.

She smiled and nodded at him as he continued. "I'm lucky and grateful, but I'm gonna be selfish and ask for a few more wishes." He turned to Lisa. "The first wish is for you to have the happiest birthday ever. I'm selfishly really glad that things went so bad for you on your twenty-fifth birthday so that you came home, searching for comfort. The second wish I'm gonna make is..."

He moved his chair back and dropped to one knee amongst giggles and gasps from the onlookers.

Lisa's hand flew to her mouth. "Holy moley," she muttered, causing laughter from the crowd.

He took her hand away from her mouth and held it tight. "I really, really, really, wish that you Lisa, will be my wife and let me love you and take care of you forever. I want you to have my children because you already have my heart. Lisa, will you marry me?"

He looked into her large green eyes and was mesmerized by the tears that welled and fell over onto her exquisite cheeks.

The room became quiet, aside from a few sniffles coming from the females. "Chaz, I..." She stopped, sighed, and smiled. "I thought you'd never ask."

There was uproarious laughter for just an instant. Then the room quieted as Lisa continued.

"No really, I didn't mean that to sound like a joke. What I mean is, I figured since you'd already like, been there, done that, and it ended so very badly, that you and I would probably not go that route."

"Then you're saying no?"

"No. I mean no, I'm not saying no. I'm just saying that I really never thought you'd ask."

He shook his head. "And you were willing to accept that?"

"I love you Chaz, with all my heart. I just want to be with you, in any way that's possible."

The women all made that two syllable "aww-uuh" sound that Chaz always thought was so funny.

"Then you'll marry me?" he asked again.

"Yes, Chaz, I will. I will marry you. And I can think of nothing that would please me more than to have babies with you and they'll know, right from the beginning, they'll know, all about family and home and that God is real."

The audience burst into applause and cheers. Chaz pulled out a small silver-velvet box, opened it and pulled out a beautiful diamond engagement ring. There were oohs, and ahhs all around. He took Lisa's hand and slipped the ring onto her finger, relieved that it fit just as Cindy had said it would.

Standing, he pulled Lisa to her feet.

"I hope you're not angry that I did this in front of everyone."

"It's wonderful that you chose to do this with all the people that I love looking on. This is perfect. You are perfect."

"Not hardly, though you make me want to be."

"When you guys thinking about doing it?" the very inebriated Josh asked.

"Uh, come on, buddy, give us some time to talk about it, okay?" Chaz answered.

Lisa smiled. "It's okay, Josh. I'll give you an answer. As soon as possible. Do you think next week is enough time to plan?"

The crowd cheered. Chaz moved closer, lifted her chin with his finger and kissed her. It was a long, slow, sweet kiss that held much promise. A promise of a lifetime filled with love and family and home and most importantly, Jesus. For when you know Him, everything else falls into place.

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John 14:2

"In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I

would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."

✝✝✝

A message God whispered to me:

Finding Home In Jesus' Name touched on many ugly things that unfortunately do happen in this earthly realm. Things like unrequited love, murder, incest, uncaring, neglectful mothers, parents searching for their children and the premature death of loved ones. If we choose, we can remain victims of these horrible things, or we can move forward. It is a choice. With God, all things are possible. With Jesus, you will finally have healing and peace and even joy in your hearts. How do we get past these things? You accept them instead of trying to avoid the subject. You wallow in the pain completely. And then you ask God to give you peace and lay it at Jesus' feet. The peace will come. The heartache will end. The strength will return. The joy fills you. It's a beautiful thing and you will now be stronger than ever. Letting things go doesn't mean you will forget, or even should forget. However, you can choose right now that you will not label yourself a victim any longer. It's time to let go of the things that hurt and embrace a new happy, joyous self, in Jesus' Holy Name. Remember–"We are only victims if we allow ourselves to be."

Dear Father in Heaven,

I come to you in gratitude and ask that you will bless and heal all those who have read these words or heard these words, so that those who are without a home will be found by your earth angels. So that your children can be blessed with a healing of their circumstances and have comfort and peace. Father, take away their hunger and pain, physically, mentally, emotionally and more importantly, spiritually. Keep them safe. Father, heal us so that we can, in turn, bless others. But mostly, help us all to find our true home with You. In Jesus' mighty name we pray, Amen.

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The *In Jesus' Name* Series so far consists of 14 novels, and 1 novella prequel, each bringing a different message of love and hope and God's healing light. Even though some of the first eight books can stand alone and be read out of order, you will get much more out of them if read in sequence and save the prequel to read after book #8 because it has some spoilers. This is not a ploy to get you to buy more books. The Lord had me put the books up on the website for a FREE download AND to put the print books' price on Amazon at the minimum where I receive zero royalties. They are also available on YouTube as Audio, each video being one chapter. There is a playlist for each book. Just go to *Playlists* on the channel, @mccartneygreen.

Every book involves the Kinos. After the first three books, pretty much everyone comes together, especially once you get to books 9-14, where the Kinos, Tanners, Appels and Stewarts work together.

I love to hear from readers.

Email me at mccartneygreen@gmail.com

Wishing you much love and joy,

McCartney Green aka Susan Milner

mccartneygreen.org

injesusnamemanuals.org

**Note: Believe it or not, the EFT used in the book to help Chaz is not fictional. It is also not "new agey" or praying to other gods, or anything like that. Though there are many people who embrace EFT who are into that type of thing. But let's not throw the baby out with the bath water. EFT, simply explained, is aligning the electrical impulses in your body that get out of whack during the course of emotionally stressful situations and trauma.

"Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT) is an emotional, needle-free version of acupuncture that is based on new discoveries regarding the connection between your body's subtle energies, your emotions, and your health. EFT has been reported successful in thousands of cases covering a huge range of emotional, health and performance issues. It often works where nothing else will."

"EFT is a simple healing system that reduces the stress that underlies much disease. It has proven itself successful in many scientific studies. It works on a variety of health issues, psychological problems, and performance issues, even those that have been resistant to other methods. It can be learned and applied rapidly, which has contributed to its popularity among millions of people. EFT Universe is the home of the worldwide EFT community. It hosts a wealth of resources available to both experienced and new EFT users."

http://www.eftuniverse.com.

A Note from McCartney Green...

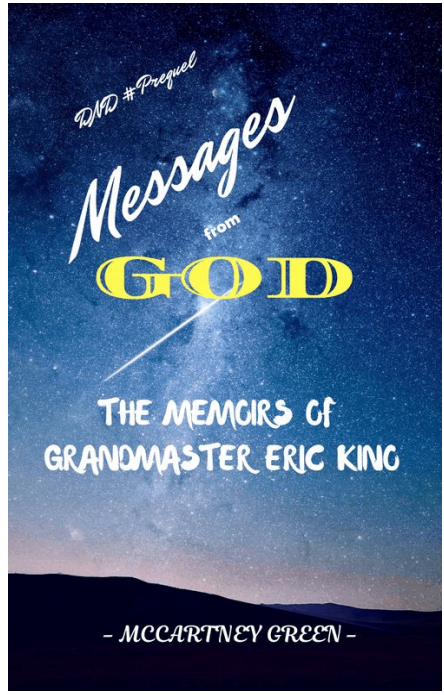
I will go where God leads me. I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life, and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

Before the story begins...
Discover the extraordinary event that changed ten-year-old Eric Kino forever. This short prequel reveals the miraculous experience that shaped the man readers come to know throughout the series. An essential read.

Before Eric Kino became the man readers have come to know throughout this series, he was simply a ten-year-old boy whose life was changed forever. Messages From God is the beginning of that journey—a brief but pivotal story that sheds new light on everything that follows.

Although this memoir was written after the first eight novels, it tells the earliest and perhaps *most important story* in Eric Kino's life. If you've ever wondered what shaped the man who would become Grandmaster Eric Kino, this is where that journey begins.



Continue the Journey
The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series
by McCartney Green

#1 A Healing—In Jesus' Name
#2 Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name
#3 Finding Home—In Jesus' Name
#4 Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name
#5 Angels—In Jesus' Name
#6 The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name
#7 Warriors—In Jesus' Name
#8 June Flower—In Jesus' Name
#9 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name
#10 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name (Part Two)
#11 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name (Part Three)
#12 Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name
#13 For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name
#14 Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

Prequel—Messages From God:
The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

and just for fun... Kino Martial Arts Student Handbook

All Books Available for Free Download at: mccartneygreen.org

About the Books

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series currently includes fourteen novels and one prequel memoir. Each story brings its own message of faith, courage, love, healing, and hope while following the ever-growing circle of family and friends surrounding the Kinos.

Although each book contains a complete story and may be read on its own, the characters' lives continue from one novel to the next. Readers will experience the fullest journey by beginning with Book One and reading the series in order.

#1—A Healing—In Jesus' Name

When Shelley Adams crosses paths with Grandmaster Eric Kino, she is still carrying wounds from a trauma that changed the course of her life. Eric sees far beyond the frightened, uncertain woman she believes herself to be—and recognizes the strength, beauty, and purpose within her.

A Healing introduces the Kino and Adams families, the Lee brothers, and the dangerous Crane brothers in a story of love, courage, spiritual healing, and freedom from the victim identity. It is the beginning of the family—and the journey—that will grow throughout the entire series.

#2—Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name

Fourteen-year-old Toby Nash is an ordinary boy with an extraordinary heart. He loves baseball, dreams of helping and healing animals, and thinks becoming a singer might be pretty cool someday. Then he meets twelve-year-old Caroline and recognizes the carefully hidden signs that something is terribly wrong in her life.

As Toby and those around him struggle to protect a wounded child, Suffer the Children confronts the devastating realities of abuse while showing the difference one observant, courageous person can make. It is a story of rescue, patient love, faith, and the long road

toward learning to feel safe.

#3—Finding Home—In Jesus' Name

Lisa Lewis has spent years building a successful life while distancing herself from the painful family secrets she left behind. When circumstances bring her to Pine Forest, Georgia, she encounters Chaz Stewart, his remarkable family, and the grandmother who never stopped loving her.

Finding Home introduces Chaz, Lisa, Maddie, Jodi, John, and the Pine Forest family whose lives will soon become closely entwined with the Kinos. Through romance, danger, buried truth, teen pregnancy, incest, and post-traumatic stress, this story asks what it truly means to come home.

#4—Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name

The entire Kino family returns in a story centered on movie star and martial arts champion Ricky Kino and the fiercely independent Breanna Adams. Their love has never been simple, and the choices they make will affect not only their own future but the lives of the young people watching them.

As danger takes root close to home, Weeds Grow explores family relationships, fatherhood, personal identity, sexuality, fear, hatred, and the courage required to confront what has been allowed to grow in darkness. Some weeds can be pulled. Others fight to survive.

#5—Angels—In Jesus' Name

Widowed mother Lizzy Anderson is raising five little girls while working nights as a nurse and doing everything she can to hold her family together. Special Agent Keegan Tanner is dark, dangerous, driven—and carrying evidence that could expose a horrifying criminal operation.

When their lives collide, Lizzy and Keegan are drawn into a battle involving corruption, assault, child trafficking, and powerful

people willing to destroy anyone who stands in their way. With help from the Kinos, the Pine Forest family, and Ameritech, they must discover whether wounded people can still trust love—and whether ordinary human beings can sometimes become angels for one another.

#6—The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name

Jeff Davis returns in a story that introduces Mickey, a fierce young woman who has spent much of her life believing she is expendable. When she is taken by people who place no value on human life, Jeff and the growing Ameritech family will risk everything to bring her home.

The Worth of Souls is a story of kidnapping, sacrifice, courage, first love, and the immeasurable value of every human soul. It also offers an unforgettable glimpse of teenage Jeffy Kino and Cameron Wallace—two young people whose connection will help shape the future of the series.

#7—Warriors—In Jesus' Name

Shelley's youngest sons, Mark and Joey Adams, are grown men now, each carrying the teachings, strength, and example of the family that raised them. But even the strongest warriors may find themselves facing enemies they cannot defeat with physical skill alone.

Warriors confronts domestic violence in its most recognizable and insidious form—the gradual isolation, control, fear, and destruction of a person's spirit. It is a story about recognizing abuse, finding the courage to escape it, and learning that true strength is not found in domination, but in love, protection, truth, and freedom.

#8—June Flower—In Jesus' Name

June Flower Kino—Jeffy to those who love her—has grown from the miraculous child introduced in Book One into a gifted physician whose discoveries may change the future of medicine. But

there are powerful people who will do anything to prevent that future from arriving.

Her journey takes her across the world, into danger, loss, breathtaking beauty, and the lives of two unforgettable Ugandan children. As Cameron Wallace returns to protect the girl he never stopped loving, the entire cast of the series gathers for a sweeping story of courage, family, sacrifice, healing, reunion, and one final twist that reveals the story may be far from over.

#9—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name

The next generation steps forward as the series moves between Hollywood and Pine Forest, Georgia. Young Eric Kino begins questioning the path laid before him, while Marine Raider Jacob Appel returns home and discovers that the girl he has known all his life may no longer be merely the little sister figure he left behind.

Meanwhile, fourteen-year-old Gabe Tanner—the charismatic only son in a family of beautiful sisters—is beginning a journey that will alter the lives of both the Tanner and Kino families. Love grows, danger gathers, and a shocking ending given to the author in a dream changes everything.

#10—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Two

The story continues as Gabe Tanner and those who love him struggle with the consequences of what came before. Families draw closer, young relationships deepen, and faith is tested as darkness attempts to reshape the lives of the next generation.

At the same time, Eric Kino III begins to see his own path more clearly when he encounters a young woman stranded beside a highway. One act of compassion opens the door to a story larger than either of them expects, proving once again that a seemingly ordinary moment may be part of God's extraordinary plan.

#11—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name, Part Three

The consequences of what came before are still unfolding as

Young Eric struggles to recover, families adjust to new realities, and the next generation begins stepping into roles once carried by their parents. Love deepens, new relationships take root, and healing proves to be as much about patience and trust as strength.

As Gabe and Taylor's influence grows and the expanding family is drawn toward Pine Forest, Georgia, long-awaited purposes begin to surface. Children become leaders, parents learn when to step back, and a new generation begins discovering that the work God has placed before them may be larger than any of them imagined.

#12—Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name

The family gathers in Pine Forest with an enormous goal: feed thousands of God's children, meet practical needs, restore dignity, and serve every person who crosses their path. But what begins as a Thanksgiving mission soon becomes something far greater than food.

As attacks mount and darkness works to stop the ministry, the Kinos, Tanners, Appels, Stewarts, and the next generation refuse to retreat. Families are strengthened, long-held wounds begin to heal, new bonds are made permanent, and ordinary acts of service become miracles in the lives of people who simply needed someone to see them. Feed My Sheep asks what might happen if serving God meant noticing one person at a time—and refusing to walk past.

#13—For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name

For the first time, celebrate Christmas with the Kinos, Tanners, and the enormous family God has gathered around them. But this season becomes far more than decorations, gifts, and traditions as old wounds surface, former enemies return, strangers arrive carrying hidden needs, and forgotten places are given new life.

Through forgiveness, rescue, reconciliation, service, and unexpected second chances, the family discovers that honoring the birth of Jesus means more than remembering what happened long ago. It means becoming His hands and heart now—welcoming the unwanted, restoring what has been broken, and making room for

those who thought they had no place to belong.

#14—Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

A mysterious stranger arrives in Pine Forest searching for answers about his family's past—and carrying the weight of darkness that has followed generations. His arrival may also bring an unexpected answer for Lily Tanner, who has begun to wonder whether everyone she loves has found their person except her.

But a far greater story is unfolding. Grandmaster Eric Kino discovers that he is not the only man whose life was changed by an angelic encounter at the age of ten. One by one, others emerge—men from across the world who disappeared for three days, returned with a calling, and were sent to teach.

As the Twelve are drawn together and darkness closes in, families, warriors, believers, and former strangers converge on Pine Forest. Old mysteries begin to make sense, lives are transformed, new love takes root, and a lifetime of seemingly separate callings begins to reveal a larger design—one meant for such a time as this.

What Readers Are Saying

Featured Reader Review...

"I just finished book nine in this series—DND #9—and I can honestly say I've been hooked since I started a few weeks ago. I found the author's website and began listening to her read the books aloud, and I haven't been able to stop since.

"The best way I can describe these books is that they're like a "how-to" manual for living as a Christian, told through an incredible story. Despite being the best fiction I've ever heard, the characters stay true to their faith—they don't cuss, and they don't sleep around before marriage. Instead, they lead by example, showing what it means to live a life guided by Christ.

"The books don't shy away from real-life struggles either. They walk you through tough situations, showing how to respond with faith—when to pray, how to pray, and how to lean on God through it all. I've read the Bible so many times that, at one point, I started to feel a little numb to it. But these books brought a fresh perspective that reminded me why I love Scripture in the first place.

"I'd recommend this series over watching TV or just about anything else the world has to offer—except reading the Bible itself."

More Reader Comments...

"I know deeply in my heart that your books will indeed be used as training manuals. My spirit was a witness to that when I heard you speak it when I first started listening to the books. That lit a fire under me to listen to them all, ASAP!" Yvonne Espy

"Angels is my new favorite book! I had the weekend off and all I did was read. I couldn't put it down. I only have a few pages left but I don't want it to end. Plus when I finish I will have to wait until your next book comes out. I just wanted to tell you how much I LOVED reading this book!"

"Just when I thought your books couldn't get any better I was proven wrong with Weeds Grow! What an exciting, great book. I am having trouble getting my work done because I can't put it down. You are an amazing writer and I have to say WOW!"

"I absolutely love DND #1. I can't wait to start reading the other books in the series. I was amazed at how addicted I became to the book. I can't stop thinking about the characters and their stories. I can definitely relate to Shelley's self confidence issues. Her strength is so great and makes me feel like I can be as strong as her in whatever situation life has to throw my way. Thank you for writing such an inspirational and motivating book."

"I have read the first three books and I love them all. They are addicting! The problem is, I don't get enough sleep when I read them because I can't put them down! I am now having withdrawals because I don't have the 4th book. McCartney- you are great."

"I have read everything you have put out and have been patiently waiting for more. I love them all as they are all unique and different. Can't wait for more.(a thankful fan)"

"Just wanted you to know I loved all your books. Now, I am doing something I only do with my all time favorites. I am going back and reading them again. Thanks for sharing your gift. P.S. You are the real deal!"

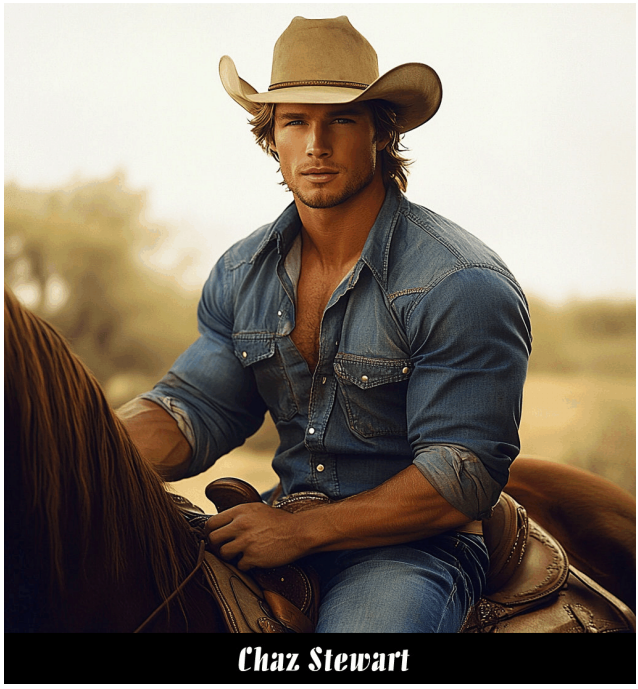
"Hey McCartney~ Thanks so much for sending me "Dandelions Never Die." I absolutely loved it! As a fellow writer and "professional romance novel reader" I can honestly say you are truly gifted with writing talent. I've added you to the list of my favorite writers and I'm looking forward to reading another one of your books soon. Hugs!"

I love to read books that make me think and have positive motivational ideas in them and I have to say, this book has it all. Well written and hard to put down, *Messages* certainly gave me something to think about. McCartney Green has a style of writing that makes people feel like we can make the world a better place. She is a true light and always makes me smile. I look forward to reading her future books.

~Melanie Glenise Schmitt~
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Once again, Author McCartney Green has delivered a well written title that deserves much attention and appreciation. The work is chock full of wisdom spoken through the mind and heart of the much beloved character in her *DND In Jesus' Name series*, Grandmaster Eric Kino, who is based on a personal epiphany. I absolutely adored this character, so it was a real treat for the author to give her readers more from the patriarch of this amazing family. Though I may not be in complete personal agreement with some of the spiritual aspects, I can certainly glean the truths and wisdom in this book for leading and living a more joyful and contented life. I found myself nodding in agreement more than not. Regardless of where you are in your spiritual life, there is something for everyone here. The only thing I would suggest as a reader of her series is to read that series before reading this book. There are a lot of spoilers here for the series if you haven't read it yet. Also, it will give you a better understanding of the heart and mind of the man that is Grandmaster Eric Kino. And as you read this title, you will easily be able to envision him telling you his story as you sit out on the patio of his beautiful home with wife Shelley by his side, taking in the ocean breezes while you enjoy a cup of cleansing tea.

~Marla Thompson~
Indiana


Chaz Stewart


Lisa Lewis Stewart


John Appel


Jodi Appel



Maddie Lewis



Marcus and Andrea Winstead

More Pics Here!

Continue with DND #4 Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name
Sneak preview...

Matthew 13:30
"Let both grow together until the harvest:
and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers,
Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles
to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn."

"Take a look at that."

Ricky Kino glanced at the scandal mag his friend tossed on the table as he joined him for lunch. On the front was a picture of one of Hollywood's favorite sweethearts. She wore a bikini with a man's tailored shirt pulled on over top of it. The open shirt revealed a slim, toned body and long, shapely legs. Her just-below-shoulder-length shiny chestnut locks were swept up in a pony tail. She was smiling at, and holding hands with a large, muscle-bound guy in swim trunks. The man wore dark glasses and a baseball cap. The headline pretty much summed it up.

Breanna Adams and new body guard, Nicholas James, more than a working relationship.

Ricky sighed, folded the paper in half and handed it to the waiter who came to take their order. "Toss that please," he said softly.

"Of course, sir," the waiter replied, tucking the offending paper under his arm.

"Don't bring me trash like that," Ricky implored of Steve Reynolds, his long time friend.

Steve shrugged. "Doesn't that bother you? Because, I tell ya, it sure as heck bothers me."

Ricky frowned. "You gotta stop reading that stuff. Those papers never print the truth."

"You didn't see the pictures, man. Bree and this guy, they're definitely, um, together."

"Good grief, Steve, will you give me a break?"

"Sorry, Rick. I guess it's my way of encouraging you to just go after her."

"It's not that easy, especially now that she's a big celebrity."

"Big celebrity? And what are you?" Steve asked of the martial arts icon and heartthrob leading man. "Besides, you've been around a lot longer than her."

"It doesn't matter who's been in the public eye longer. That's not what I'm talking about. Her celebrity status makes her vulnerable to gossip and what she wouldn't like is what they'll print if she and I were to get together. You know, the brother-sister thing."

"You're not her freakin' brother."

He sighed. "I think I know that very well," he said softly. Then louder, "But that's not how the world will see it. My father and her mother got married and they have a child together who is my sister and Bree's sister."

"Still, you and Bree are not related, Rick. Not by blood. Besides, since when have you cared what the world thinks?"

"Since never, but you see, it's not me that cares. It's her. Her career means everything to her. I don't blame her for that. She's worked darn hard to get where she is, and she's not about to put her career in jeopardy. Not for me. Not for anyone."

Steve nodded his head. "Then maybe she *should* consider a relationship with you. It would be amazing publicity. I can see it now, the big scoop: *Breanna Adams and Ricky Kino have been secret lovers for years*."

"Shut up, Steve."

Steve eyed his friend. "It's true, isn't it? I think I've just hit the nail on the head."

Ricky drew a deep breath. "No, it's not true. We got together and dated for a brief time the year our parents first met. That was a long time ago. About eight years, actually."

"Come on, man. Do you mean to tell me you haven't been in those pants one time?"

Rick's eyes flashed. "If you weren't my friend who I know says ridiculous things without thinking first, I'd kick your butt right now. Bree and I have barely seen each other more than a few hours at a time for the better part of five years. She barely acknowledges me and then it's only as her step-brother."

"You weren't watching her last summer at the party at your father's house. I was. She has the hots for you, Rick. She watched you every second you weren't looking at her. I'm telling you, you've gotta go after her before it's too late."

"I'm not gonna waste my life mooning over someone who doesn't

give a flip about me. She's made that clear enough over the years. Look, Steve, at one time I really thought I was in love with the girl. We had our fun and she called it quits first. Yeah, that hurt, but I'm over it. Got it?"

Steve shook his head. "Like hell you're over it." He went on quickly, taking note of Ricky's fierce expression. "I'm your friend, Rick, so I'm gonna tell it like it is. If you gotta kick my butt for it, then so be it. You're still in love with Bree and she has feelings for you too. The two of you need to be honest with yourselves and give in to it. It's the only way you're ever gonna be happy."

"I'm happy enough."

"Yeah, you got hot chicks hanging all over you and whenever the mood strikes you take your pick and bring one home to play around. But I know you're not happy."

Ricky's eyes narrowed. "This discussion is over."

"Okay. I've had my say and I got your back. But bro, I'll tell ya, maybe it's the private investigator in me, but I don't like the looks of this Nicholas James guy and I intend to do some digging."

"You do that, Mr. PI. Just please, do me a favor and don't come to me with the details."

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“My, my, how I love pi!”

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God used pi to teach me that His universe is not random.

To the human eye, the decimal sequence of pi looks like total randomness—endless, chaotic digits spilling out into infinity without an obvious repeating cycle. People look at their own lives and trials the exact same way: "Why this tragedy? Why this random pain? It's all chaos!" But just like pi, God’s universe is mathematically, divinely ordered to the infinite degree. Every single digit, every step, every trial is ***already known*** by the Creator. Placing pi at the end of the books isn't just a quirky signature—it’s an eternal stamp declaring: “There is no chaos. God has done the math.”