



MOTEL

Illusive Witness

S.Y. Thompson

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Illusive Witness

by

S.Y. Thompson

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by Regal Crest
Texas

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Dedication

This is for Linda North, the best friend who hangs in there no matter what.

And for Debra May, for weathering my emotional hurricanes. They named one for you, didn't they?

And for Heather Flournoy, without whom my literary voice would remain silent.

Epigraph

We forget cruelty and past betrayal,
Heedless of where the next bright bolt may fall
~Robert Graves

Chapter One

“KARL, WHERE ARE you?” Ruth Gallagher peered upward in frustration and attempted to blow the sweaty bangs out of her eyes.

The thirty-seven-year-old redhead was a novice mountain climber at best. Having her closest friend rush to the top while she dangled from a solitary line didn't improve her mood. Ruth couldn't see Karl anywhere near the ledge. She expected a middle-aged physician to be smarter than that. Leaving a climbing buddy behind was a serious no-no. Plastered against the granite face, Ruth blinked against bright sunlight and falling dust as she attempted to spot him.

With no response forthcoming, Ruth ground her teeth and dug her fingertips into the unyielding surface, mentally preparing to complete the climb on her own. She tried to motivate herself with the reassurance that she had the latest in mountain climbing equipment. Besides, they had deliberately chosen a short summit in direct relation to her abilities. How hard could it be?

As if the fates were taunting her, one of the pitons anchoring Ruth's safety line in place suddenly gave way. A startled scream erupted past her lips as she plummeted twenty feet toward the scrub, rocks and trees of the forest floor. Fortunately, the other anchors held, preventing Ruth from slamming into the ground another thirty feet below. The rope snapped taut and she spun around before careening sideways against the rocky wall.

Ruth's breath rushed out when the rope harness tightened abruptly around her groin and mid-section. Pain resonated up and down her spine. Gravel cascaded down over her head and shoulders. Ruth gripped the rope so hard her knuckles whitened. Her heart pounded in fear and adrenaline sang in her veins, but the balance of the pitons seemed secure. Suddenly, Karl's blond head popped into sight as he peered down at her.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah, peachy.” Ruth spit out a mouthful of dirt and wiped grit from her eyes. She tried to ignore the cramps in her groin, generated by the overly tight harness. “Where were you?”

“I had to take a leak.”

“Charming. Do you think you could give me a hand?”

“Okay, hold on a second.”

The instant he disappeared Ruth heard a muffled thud. She thought he had probably tripped over his own feet. It served him right for leaving her hanging, literally. Still, she should check on him.

“Karl? Karl, is something wrong?”

He reappeared at the top and he seemed fine. Then a look of confusion came across his tanned face and he fell to the ground just out of sight. Ruth didn't hear him moving around. She could barely see the top of his head and one hand that dangled over the edge.

“Karl!” Ruth screamed, as if the increase in volume could generate an answer from someone who was possibly injured. “What's happened?”

A drop of something splashed against her cheek and she flinched. Ruth reached up to wipe the substance away and when she checked, she saw it was red. More saliently, it was blood. Karl's blood.

Unexpected movement made her look up again. Someone dragged Karl from the ledge of the cliff. She thought a stranger must have seen what happened and had come to their rescue. Maybe, they were trying to perform first aid on Karl. That notion vanished when Ruth saw an unfamiliar form dressed in camouflage clothing step into Karl's place near the cliff's edge. Judging from the form, Ruth couldn't tell if the attacker was male or female and she couldn't see their face. She assumed from the violence of the attack that the perpetrator was a man. The fact that he wore a black stocking mask told her this person's intentions were not benevolent.

Without a word, the assailant dropped to his knees and reached for Ruth's safety line. His hands were also covered, encased in black leather gloves. He grasped the rope and began sawing through with a large hunting knife. Ruth's focus seemed to narrow down to that one spot. She saw nothing except the blade, serrated along the upper edge and slightly curved at the end. Her brain kicked back into gear and she realized that in another moment, she would be falling to her death. Even if the distance didn't kill her, it would definitely leave her severely wounded and easy prey for her attacker to finish her off.

Ruth struggled against that scenario, rallying herself to plant her feet firmly against the rock and reach for the spare line hanging at her side. She needed to tie off quickly before the stranger cut through the rope anchoring her to the top. With the spare line looped around her arm, Ruth quickly attempted to secure it to the piton from which she currently dangled. Before she made the first knot, Ruth felt the rope bounce and knew she wouldn't have enough time. A sob escaped her but she kept trying, refusing to give in to the inevitable. Then, from the corner of her eye, she spotted an alternative that she should have thought of before.

Ruth grabbed for Karl's rope where it still lay anchored beside her. She fumbled clumsily with her harness but finally unclipped the D-ring that released her from the safety line. Using the other rope, Ruth quickly rappelled toward the ground. She had gone barely ten feet before the line went completely slack in her hands. Perspective made it feel as though she hung in mid air for a moment before the realization that the line had been cut registered in her mind.

Arms and legs pinwheeled in the air as gravity asserted itself and Ruth plummeted toward the forest floor. Terror numbed her mind. Ruth felt the pain from bouncing off rock and branches. The crunch of breaking bone echoed loudly in her head as she came to an abrupt halt, forcing a shriek as agony tore into her body. The scent of crushed, musty moss surrounded her. Darkness closed in quickly, embracing her with the comfort of oblivion.

Sometime later, flashes of images danced across her corneas, disjointed without context or continuity. Ruth's thoughts were unmoored. She couldn't latch onto anything, real or imagined. Instead, she felt as though she was floating in a sea of confusion. Through an effort of will, she opened her eyes. Bright lights flashed by overhead, voices raised in a cacophony of pandemonium and accompanied by the sound of mechanical beeps. Reality faded once more and this time she didn't struggle.

“THERE YOU ARE. Come on back. Ruth, I need you to open your eyes.”

The voice sounded far away, echoing in a steel drum that reverberated in her head. Ruth reached for the feminine tones, struggling toward consciousness. With awareness came the throbbing fire. She flinched and immediately heard the voice again.

“I know it hurts, but I need for you to wake up and talk to me. After that, I’ll give you something for the pain.”

The promise of relief induced Ruth to try. She pushed the drowsiness back and reached for the soft voice. Ruth’s eyelids fluttered, and she finally forced them open. Cerulean blue captured and held her. Ruth stared into the depths, finding strength and compassion. Her gaze spread out to encompass dimples, a generous mouth, short dark hair and flesh pale from too many hours indoors.

“Hi, I’m Doctor Jordan Pierce. Welcome back. You had us all pretty worried. We’ll be notifying your next of kin.”

Ruth attempted to reply but the words rumbled in her throat. She felt like she’d gargled with broken glass. A sense of panic caused her to tense. Why couldn’t she talk? Doctor Pierce touched her hand and Ruth focused on that contact.

“Don’t try to talk. We’ve had you on a ventilator and there’s a tube in your throat. We’ll see about getting it out when I’m sure you can continue to breathe on your own. Nod if you understand.”

Ruth nodded once, the movement sharp from impatience. She had so many questions and this drawn out method of communication wore on her temper.

“Good, do you remember anything about your accident?”

What accident? Ruth frowned as she tried to recall such an event. She remembered leaving her house to go climbing with Karl and arriving at the site he’d chosen. Beyond the moment when he’d shut off the SUV, Ruth drew a blank. She shook her head.

“That’s all right. It’s not uncommon to have memory loss given your condition. From what I understand, you fell quite a distance while climbing. You have a concussion. You also fractured your left wrist and both of your legs. We easily repaired your wrist, but I’m afraid your legs took some creative thinking. I’ve already operated once, but you’ll require a few more surgeries before I’m comfortable releasing you.”

As interesting as she found the information, Ruth felt more concern for Karl. She wanted to know if he had also fallen. Was he all right? Where was he? What happened on that summit? Her body hurt all over, making it difficult to think.

Doctor Pierce continued her monologue. “You’ve had someone watching over you since the paramedics brought you in. I’ll let him come back to sit with you once we’re finished. Would you like something for the pain now?”

Relieved that Karl was there and unharmed, Ruth nodded. She felt free to give in to her own needs. Ruth watched as Doctor Pierce held up a switch for her to see.

“This is a morphine pump. Press the button on the end once when you need some relief. Don’t worry about pressing too many times because the pump is regulated to only allow a safe amount of medicine. Understand?”

Ruth nodded and Doctor Pierce pressed the switch. The medication acted quickly. Almost at once, Ruth felt the fire burning brightly in her limbs begin to lessen. Pierce scribbled something on a clipboard while a blood pressure cuff cinched down on Ruth’s arm. Drowsiness lurked, pulling relentlessly but Ruth resisted. The doctor had said Karl could come back in once they left. She desperately needed to see him before she could sleep, to verify with her own eyes that he truly was uninjured.

Seconds passed that felt like an eternity. Ruth jerked awake, fighting the seduction of sleep. The medical staff concluded their business and headed for the door. Ruth heard the doctor tell Karl he could go inside. A welcoming smile lit Ruth's face as a male form approached the bed. She blinked away the blurriness caused by the drugs and her smile disappeared.

Mark Fuller, Karl's cousin, lifted her limp hand from the mattress. He held on and settled into the chair beside her.

"Hey there, it's good to see you awake. I'm so sorry about Karl."

Chapter Two

RUTH STOOD BESIDE the hospital bed, leaning her upper thighs against the mattress to keep them from wobbling while she dressed. Her legs still ached, but at least Doctor Pierce had finally removed the cast from her left wrist. The flesh on that arm was pale and scaly. It itched like crazy, but Ruth was happy to be free of the encumbering plaster. She could work the atrophied muscles back into shape in no time provided she was careful not to re-break the bones.

Her legs would take months to heal, but Ruth was forever grateful that a park ranger had chosen the exact moment that she fell to arrive on the scene. Ranger Johnson had been driving around checking on campers in the area when it happened. His quick thinking had saved her life. Ruth almost choked on the thought. It was just too bad he hadn't arrived in time to save Karl.

Ruth still had no memories of what took place on the crest. She had tried to cooperate when the police questioned her about the incident, but she couldn't tell them what she didn't know. Ruth had the feeling that one of the detectives hadn't believed her, but she had no choice but to acknowledge Karl's death. Worse, Ruth had to face up to the fact that someone had murdered him and tried to kill her. The attacker hadn't left any evidence behind, but Detective Conroy was heartless enough to let Ruth know that Karl hadn't died instantly. Someone had stabbed him repeatedly, the wounds meant to inflict pain and a slow death. The police thought Karl had known something and been tortured for the information. They believed Karl must have shared that knowledge with Ruth.

When she finally convinced them she didn't know anything, they left her to her misery. Now, for the first time in two months, Ruth was preparing to leave the hospital. It felt so strange, leaving the room that had become her temporary home. Well, not quite. At least when she did get home, Ruth could lock out unwanted visitors.

Mark Fuller had been by her side throughout the hospital ordeal. Almost daily, Ruth awakened to see him sitting at her bedside. She did her utmost to be polite to Mark considering that he had lost someone too. In spite of her best efforts, there was just something about him that she didn't trust. Karl had spoken about his cousin as something close to saintly, but it wasn't a quality Ruth could see.

"Hi, I hope I'm not interrupting." Mark spoke from the doorway, startling Ruth slightly.

She had been standing with her back toward the door buttoning her jacket and hadn't realized anyone was in her room. Ruth turned around slowly, trying not to show her surprise. "How do you do that? I never hear you coming."

"I'm swift, silent and deadly." Mark came farther into the room. "I think I used to be a jungle cat in a former life."

"I believe it." Ruth wasn't sure if she meant that as a compliment. "As for your question, no you're not interrupting. I was waiting for my driver."

"Don't tell me you're looking forward to leaving this glorified country club?"

"Actually, yes. I can't stand being confined. But I'm being rude. Was there something specific you needed or were you coming to visit?"

A frown crossed his face as though Mark was trying to decide how to phrase what he wanted to say. He shoved his hands deep into his pants pockets and finally looked up at her. "Truthfully, I came by to discuss a business proposition with you."

"Oh?" As a well-known professional golfer, corporations approached Ruth with business propositions on a regular basis. Still, she was a little surprised to hear such a statement coming from this man.

"As you know I sponsor an annual fundraiser for the Metropolitan Children's Center. I thought that this year we could set up the Karl Stein Foundation. Nothing elaborate," he added holding up his hand. "I just think Karl would have liked being remembered in this way."

"That sounds very thoughtful, but what do you need me for?" Ruth feigned innocence, knowing exactly where Mark was headed.

"Well, we need donations to set up the fund. Of course, it's for charity so everything is tax deductible. Unfortunately, I can't contribute everything myself. What do you say?"

While the idea of such a fund appealed to Ruth, she remained hesitant. What he was proposing meant a lot of money and Ruth wasn't sure what he would use it for. The children's center did a lot of good in the community, fostering and finding permanent homes for needy kids. They also responded in times of disaster, providing medical relief, housing and food to the community. The idea was tempting, but she needed more information.

"I don't know, Mark. I'll need to think about it and there are a lot of questions such as who would oversee the operation, who the other contributors are and what the funds would be used for. I'd need to see something in writing that answers all of those questions at a minimum."

"I'll tell you what," he offered. "Why don't I take you to dinner and we can discuss it? Besides, it gives me the excuse to pass my rounds off to Doctor Chaney."

"I'm sure Doctor Chaney appreciates that."

"Oh, I'm sure." Mark apparently missed her sarcasm. He laughed a little and amended his prior statement. "Well, maybe not."

Both laughed at the small joke and Ruth felt a bit of the shadow lingering on her heart lift slightly. Any man who put children first couldn't be all bad.

"Are you hungry? After all of these months of hospital food, I thought you might be in the mood for something tasty to eat."

Ruth considered the suggestion briefly. "As you pointed out Mount Sinai does cater to the rich and famous so the food hasn't been that bad. I really just want to get home, if you don't mind. Besides, I'd like to see where Karl was buried so I'll just wait for the driver. I'm sure we can set something up for later next week."

She hadn't attended the funeral because she was still undergoing surgeries on her legs at the time. Ruth thought of Karl often and felt guilty at having missed the services, even though there was no way she could have been there.

"Of course I don't mind." Mark reached for her bags. "However, I insist on walking you to the car."

A dark head popped through the door, surprising Ruth a little. She was thrilled to see that Doctor Pierce had come to see her off. Not for the first time, she noticed the look of disdain she passed over Mark before the blue eyes met her own. A friendly expression lit Pierce's features and Ruth thought that she had imagined things.

Doctor Pierce had a way of looking at a person that made them believe they were the most important being in her world. No wonder she was so popular among patients and staff alike. Her figure didn't hurt things either, Ruth realized, trying to keep her expression neutral.

“Ms. Gallagher, I hear you are leaving us.”

“Well, you did sign the release order. Don’t tell me you’ve changed your mind?”

“No,” Doctor Pierce stated emphatically holding up a hand and causing everyone to laugh. “I just hope I don’t have more model patients like you in the near future. I don’t think I could survive it.”

“I just don’t like hospitals.” Ruth shrugged, not offended by the comment.

“Well, you can’t blame her for that.”

“Yes, of course,” Pierce agreed in a slightly cooler tone.

It looked almost as though she disliked Mark, but Ruth found that improbable. Mark Fuller was an extremely attractive man by most standards, with broad shoulders and dark hair graying a little at the temples. He was an accomplished surgeon and considered quite a catch. He wasn’t rich by conventional standards, but he was a self-made man coming originally from a background of poverty and parental abuse. Most women fairly drooled over him. Of course, Ruth didn’t feel that way about him since her tastes tended to run to the feminine. She found Doctor Pierce more to her liking.

“Well, we’d better be going,” Mark said politely, breaking into Ruth’s musings.

“Yes, of course. Thanks again, Doctor Pierce. I appreciate everything you’ve done for me.” Ruth shook hands with the doctor, ignoring the slight tingle in her palm from the contact.

“Please, call me Jordan. You’re not a patient anymore. I’m just glad that I could help. You were a very lucky woman. You know, Ruth, just because you’re leaving us doesn’t mean you must be a stranger. Stop by once in a while for a coffee.”

“Thank you.” Ruth was truly touched at the offer. Doctor Pierce made a casual invitation sound so sincere. Ruth thought she really meant it. “I’ll do that. Besides, I still have physical therapy to attend.”

A few moments later, Ruth and Mark walked down the hall. Jordan stood for a moment in the doorway with her arms folded as she watched. Ruth felt the weight of her stare and was conscious of Mark’s solicitous hand on her elbow. He clutched her bag in his free hand. Ruth wondered if Doctor Pierce thought they were a couple. She tensed up in response to that idea and leaned more heavily on her cane, trying to put distance between herself and Mark. She didn’t need his help. Apparently, he felt her reaction and released her arm. Ruth resented the pronounced limp, but Doctor Pierce told her it would decrease in time and she would regain full use of the extremity.

When they turned the corner, Ruth glanced back. Pierce had gone. Ruth missed her already. She’d become accustomed to seeing the sparkling blue eyes every day. She shook her head and looked toward the front hospital entrance just in time to see a large black car pull to the curb. Henry was right on time.

The chauffeur bounded out of the limo with a smile and a welcoming embrace. He released her quickly, coloring slightly at his emotional display. “Miss. Ruth, it’s so good to see you again.”

“It’s good to see you too, Henry. You’ve met Mark Fuller, haven’t you?”

Henry shook his head and offered a hand. “I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure. It’s nice to meet you, sir.”

Mark placed the handle of Ruth’s bag over Henry’s fingers, openly ignoring the proffered handshake. Ruth thought him extremely rude, but Henry acted as if nothing happened. He turned away from Mark and opened the rear door.

Ruth settled onto the back seat as Mark leaned inside to bid her goodbye. Rather than hug him, Ruth leaned away to look into his eyes. Henry had stepped away to stow her bag, giving her the opportunity to call Mark on his actions. "That was rude."

"What was rude?"

Did he truly not realize Henry had tried to shake hands? Ruth wasn't sure. Maybe he was just obtuse. In any case, Henry hadn't commented so Ruth chose to let it go. "Never mind. I'm sure I'll see you soon, Mark."

"Count on it."

He stepped back and slammed the door. Henry slid behind the wheel and pulled away from the curb after checking traffic. Finally, Ruth felt herself relaxing for the first time in months. The familiar scent of the car's leather, coupled with the presence of a friendly man she'd known for most of her life, helped Ruth feel that she could finally let go.

"Would you like to head home, Miss Ruth?"

"Not yet, Henry. I'd like to go by the cemetery first."

Ruth told him where to go and Henry headed for the outskirts of Los Angeles. Traffic was light this time of day, and Ruth allowed her thoughts to wander. She silently berated herself for not remembering the event that cost Karl his life. The lack of recall regarding that tragedy prevented Ruth from grieving fully. In a way, it felt like something that had happened to someone else. Yet no matter how hard she tried, Ruth simply couldn't bring the memories forth from the guarded darkness of her mind.

Half an hour later, Henry turned onto a quiet street. "We're here, Miss."

Ruth opened the door as soon as he parked. She stepped out into the California sunshine and took a deep breath of fresh air. The rolling green lawns might have been mistaken for a park. Late afternoon sunshine filtered through the tree branches. Leaves from the large oak trees dappled the ground with patterns of light and shadow. Birds sang cheerfully overhead while a couple of squirrels tussled nearby in the grass.

It was a perfect day for family barbeques or a day at the beach, but somehow Ruth didn't feel it was appropriate for the current setting. Instead, the heavens should be thick with heavy, ominous storm clouds. Torrents of rain should be pouring, pounding into a frozen wasteland instead of these immaculately kept grounds. Looking around the cemetery, Ruth noticed a crowd. A funeral service was in progress a short distance away. She thought about the mourners as she walked toward the Stein family's row of plots.

Ruth's heart ached for the grieving relatives and friends attending the funeral. Morbidly, she wondered if the deceased had led a long, happy life or if they had met a premature death like her friend. She fought the sting of tears and focused on the concrete marker in front of her.

Karl Stein
June 22, 1961 - October 2, 2014
Beloved Son
Cherished Friend

Somehow, the words were hollow. They couldn't begin to portray the energetic young man with the irrepressible smile. They couldn't describe his joy of life and willingness to try anything, especially if it was dangerous. How could the tastefully inscribed words convey the sensitivity of a man that donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to the ASPCA because he adored cats?

Ruth sighed heavily and leaned her weight against the cane as she attempted to ignore the insistent throbbing in her right hip and thigh. The circle of life and death, she thought darkly. We just pass away and become a distant memory. What a cheerful thought. As much as she tried to push away the melancholy, it lingered as a product of too many months in the hospital as well as the loss of a good friend.

It seemed unfair that such a warm, generous person would become only a memory. Ruth remembered Mark's offer for setting up a trust fund in Karl's name. At the time, the idea hadn't really appealed to her, but now that she thought about it, she reconsidered. Why not? Earlier, she had been more concerned with the logistics of such an undertaking, but surely they could deal with any problems that might arise.

Somehow, setting up a foundation in Karl's name seemed fitting. She would phone Mark from the car and let him know. With that decision made, she glanced again toward the funeral proceedings and noticed the crowd dispersing. Black limousines and a funeral hearse pulled away in an orderly fashion until all of the cars were gone. A solitary figure remained at the newest mound of dirt. Ruth wondered if the man had walked from somewhere nearby.

She looked more closely and realized his clothing belied that fact. It was too hot and heavy for him to have walked from any distance. The stranger wore a long, heavy black coat and a black shirt. Thick, military style boots jutted from the hems of a pair of black trousers. His clothing was in keeping with the somber mood of a funeral, but he still appeared out of place in the bright summer afternoon and the boots didn't exactly coordinate with a three-piece suit. She assumed he wore one beneath the coat, but couldn't say for sure. In the scheme of things, what did it matter?

Ruth concluded that the disharmony between the stranger and the day wasn't a result of his attire. Wintry blackness and a cold hatred seemed an integral part of the man himself. It was just a feeling, Ruth reminded herself. She didn't know this man and her instincts could be way off base. That logic didn't keep her from looking at him.

He had pulled an old-fashioned, wide-brimmed hat down low on his head, hiding his face in shadow. She couldn't discern his features from such a distance, but she was convinced he was watching her, too. A prickle of fear skittered along Ruth's spine causing bumps to break out on her arms even as sweat beaded her upper lip. The surroundings seemed to close in around her and her breath came shallowly, harsh in her own ears. For a moment, she was back on the cliff with a predator intent on taking her very life.

The stranger surprised her by suddenly reaching up to tip his hat in polite greeting before turning away and ambling down the low hill. Ruth's breath left her lungs in a rush, leaving her embarrassed and weak-kneed from the small panic attack. She took a moment to collect her wits and glanced again at Karl's marker.

"Never again, my friend. No more climbing for me."

Karl, the adventurer, would never have understood. He would say that she couldn't let her fear conquer her. Regardless, Ruth knew that she would never look at a mountainside the same way again. The truth was that fear did have a firm hold on her. Her reaction to the stranger proved it. The incident on the cliffs had occurred more than two months ago and she still couldn't shake the fear and paranoia.

Ruth turned away and limped toward the limousine. Henry stood patiently next to the car, leaning against the vehicle with his hands folded. When he saw Ruth coming, he started toward her to offer assistance. Concern was evident in his creased blue eyes, but she waved him off.

Henry was a tall, strapping man. He was extremely muscular and prided himself on working out for at least two hours every day. She was certain that his strong shoulders could withstand her weight, but she had to stop relying on all of those around her, Ruth decided. She had to take her life back and this was the first small step. The attack was long over and she couldn't keep looking for phantoms around every corner.

Chapter Three

RUTH SETTLED CAREFULLY onto the seat of the limo and waited for Henry to close the door. She tried to relax and allow the tension and pain from stiff muscles to ease even as Henry climbed into the front seat and slammed his door. She kept seeing the stranger standing at a grave marker and reason couldn't make her shake the paranoia.

"Where to, Miss?" Henry asked politely as he started the car.

Emotionally and physically exhausted there was only one place she could think of where she wanted to be. What she really needed was a good long cry, with wailing and pounding of walls. Unfortunately, it was something she could not allow in front of another human being. Instead, she rubbed her right thigh, trying to massage away the persistent ache.

"Home, please." She spoke softly, but Henry apparently heard, nodding his head once before pulling away from the curb.

She remembered her decision at the gravesite and reached for the car phone. Mark had given her a card with his number on it and she fumbled to retrieve it from her pocket. He answered on the second ring, giving Ruth the impression that he'd been waiting for the call.

"Hello, Doctor Fuller. This is Ruth Gallagher. I hope I haven't disturbed you?"

Ruth was surprised at the nervous quaver in her voice. Her emotions had little to do with discussing the trust fund, and she forced the fear into a cold, dark place in the pit of her stomach. A word of warning given by Karl several years ago came to mind. Never show fear or the sharks would begin to circle. He'd told her that in regard to a professional golf tour and the opponents she would face, but it was good advice and she remembered it now. Ruth definitely thought of Mark Fuller as a shark, but sometimes a person couldn't choose with whom to do business.

"Please, call me Mark and of course you haven't bothered me. Can I assume that you're interested in what we were discussing earlier?"

Not one to jump in without more information, Ruth began slowly. "Yes, but first I would like to see a list of contributors, trustee members, and the particulars of when and where the funds would be disseminated."

"Not to worry." He sounded unconcerned with the request. "I've been working on this idea since Karl... Well, anyway. I have everything on paper. I'll have a courier bring it by this evening if that works for you."

"Around seven?"

After finalizing the arrangements, Ruth hung up and sat for a few moments staring at the surrounding scenery. Suddenly the lonely manor was the last place she wanted to be. While it was true that she had suffered a panic attack, Ruth realized that the moment had passed. Still, it was a good excuse to visit a certain brunette with a white lab coat. A smile tugged reluctantly at the corner of her thin lips. Maybe if she were very lucky Doctor Pierce would have a moment to spend with her.

"Henry, drive back to Mount Sinai. I forgot something." She realized that she didn't need to give him an excuse, but felt a little embarrassed about the desire to see her physician.

Expertly handling the long black limousine, Henry found a spot to make a U-turn on Wilshire Boulevard. Lights in the houses and shops were just beginning to flicker on. Combined with the streetlights, the whole vicinity took on a garish appearance reminiscent of a brilliantly lit Christmas tree. Would Doctor Pierce still be at the hospital? She had been there all day. Ruth might get back only to find that she had missed her. The memory of tight blue jeans hugging lean feminine curves convinced her that it was worth a try. At the same time, Ruth couldn't help but smile at her juvenile reaction to Doctor Pierce. It had definitely been too long since Ruth had sex.

Henry guided the car next to the curb in front of the hospital's emergency entrance and left the engine gently idling as he hopped out to open Ruth's door. For a moment, she ignored him as her attention fixated on the structure before her. The architecture was Spanish and boasted lattice-shaded sidewalks draped with purple and yellow bougainvillea. Throughout the institution, gray tile, speckled with pink and turquoise, shone immaculately. Pale blue walls with ice-white trim contributed to an airy atmosphere.

This was a private establishment dedicated to the extremely wealthy with a cheery and dedicated staff. Ruth had appreciated their friendly manner and easy smiles during her lengthy stay, never feeling that their expressions were false or forced. She had felt safe here, and on many times visited the arboretum proudly maintained and concealed in an inner courtyard. Of course, her trips to that sanctuary had always been at the courtesy of a friendly nurse or intern with a few spare minutes and a wheelchair.

Finally climbing out of the car into the balmy California evening, she limped toward the main entrance with only a slight pause while the automatic doors swished open. In the main floor past the nurses' station, Ruth encountered Trisha Flanagan. Unbelievably at age twenty-nine, she was head nurse of the night shift. She must have just come on duty. Ruth contributed her success to not only to her intellect, but also to her quick wit and easy manner. She had a way of making people feel warm and safe, of making them feel like family.

Trish spotted her almost instantly and a saucy grin spread across the carrot-topped young nurse's face. "Hi there, Ms. Gallagher. This is a surprise. I thought you couldn't wait to get out of here. Don't tell me you missed us already?"

Ruth returned her smile. "Nothing personal, but not a chance. Actually, I was wondering if Doctor Pierce was still around. I needed to speak with her for a moment."

"You're in luck. She's finishing up some notes in her office." Trisha nodded toward the hallway behind her to indicate that Ruth was to proceed. "I'm sure she wouldn't mind if you popped in."

"Thanks."

Ruth responded absently, already thinking about the upcoming meeting. She hoped that she wasn't interrupting Jordan's schedule too much. She made her way down the hall toward the end. All the physicians' offices were located down here.

Jordan's office was the last on the right. Ruth hesitated before knocking lightly on the door. The invitation to enter was immediate, as if Jordan were waiting for some company to interrupt the tedium of making notes. Ruth grinned as she realized she was justifying her interruption. The friendly expression was still on her face when she pushed the door open and came face-to-face with her doctor.

"Hi there." Jordan seemed truly pleased to see her. She sat behind a heavy, wooden desk dressed in a white lab coat and holding a pen in her right hand. Light, wire-framed glasses rested

on her nose and her hair was slightly mussed from the long day of work. Ruth thought she looked wonderfully sexy.

Jordan's smile faded as quickly as it had come and a brief frown rested between her eyes. "Is there something wrong?" she asked as Ruth entered the office and closed the door.

"No, not really." Ruth hesitated slightly. Now that she was here, she hesitated to lie about the purpose of her visit. The panic attack had been real, but Ruth really thought she was over it. To mention it as a reason to return to the hospital she had so recently vacated seemed dishonest.

Jordan set the pen down and stood. She perched on the corner of her desk and indicated a chair for Ruth to sit. "Please, tell me what's wrong."

The slow, unsynchronized throbbing of Ruth's thigh muscle convinced her that sitting was indeed a good idea. Jordan met her around the corner of the desk and assisted her into the chair. With the darkness that had fallen outside and only the desk lamp aglow, shadows chased around the office. For a brief instant, Ruth had the impression that she was in the Vampire Queen's lair and there was no doubt what, or who, was on the menu. She shook the sensation off as an indicator of the guilt she felt for perpetrating a ruse.

"After I left here I went by the cemetery to visit Karl's grave. That's the man who was killed when we were on the ledge." She added the explanation since Jordan hadn't known Karl. "While I was there another service was going on a few yards away. Suddenly I felt shaky, scared...the whole world seemed to be closing in on me."

"A panic attack?" Jordan asked from her spot on the corner of the desk.

"Yes, I think so. Except that it's been so long since the attack that I'm not sure if that really makes sense. It's not like me to dwell on the negative. Don't get me wrong, Karl was a wonderful man and a better friend. I'll miss him more than I can say, but surely I should have gotten over the fear of another attack since then."

"Well," Jordan began after a few thoughtful seconds, "I'm not a psychiatrist. I could give you an exam, but I doubt that I'd find anything wrong, physically at least." She stood and resumed her place in the desk chair she'd recently vacated.

"What do you think is wrong then, Doctor Pierce?"

"Call me Jordan. Look, Ruth, you've been through an intense, prolonged trauma. First, there was the attack on the ledge and the death of your friend. After that, you experienced the trauma of recovering from your own injuries. Since that day, you've been in the hospital surrounded by security and medical personnel twenty-four hours a day. This is your first day out in public. It's only natural that you'd feel vulnerable."

Ruth let out a relieved sigh. "So, what you're saying is that my reaction is perfectly normal?"

"Quite frankly, I'd be more worried if you didn't have a panic attack or two."

"I don't follow."

"Look at it this way," Jordan responded, removing her glasses as she leaned forward on her elbows. "The instinct for survival is the strongest one that humans possess. Even under hypnosis, a person cannot be forced to commit suicide or perform actions that would cause immediate death. A panic attack is merely that survival instinct flexing its muscles."

Ruth appreciated the hint of humor contained in the doctor's explanation. It showed a glimmer of the personality that Ruth really wanted to understand better. "Any suggestions?" Ruth asked the question merely to draw the conversation out, to allow her to spend more time with Jordan.

"Just take it slow." After a pause, a glimmer came into her blue eyes and Jordan asked, "When is your first therapy session?"

Ruth couldn't help but wonder where this was going. If Jordan was entertaining the idea that she was going to return to her old room at the hospital, she would discover that it wasn't going to happen. After being granted parole from her prison, even one as nice as this, Ruth wasn't about to recommit herself. Outpatient status was as far as she was willing to go.

"Tuesday, at two."

"Do you have any appointments between now and then?"

"Nothing pressing," Ruth responded hesitantly. She was waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"And you're not planning to go visit any family?"

Ruth shook her head. She wasn't really close to her aunt and she lived so far away that she hadn't even visited Ruth in the hospital.

"Are you sure? I couldn't imagine not spending time with my family. My uncle practically raised me."

"No, I'm sure. I don't really have anyone here in California."

Jordan was obviously in heavy thought as she tapped her glasses a few times on her desk, staring intently at the blotter. She must have reached a decision because she looked up and met Ruth's gaze. "How would you feel about a small vacation?"

"Excuse me? I've been on vacation for months." This was the last thing Ruth had expected.

Jordan stared at her for a moment and Ruth tried to read her expression. Before she came to any conclusions, Jordan said, "It's all right. I'm not talking about a stay at the hospital. I have a cabin on Ghost Island. It's small and fairly secluded, but there are four other cabins in walking distance if you need anything. You have to take a ferry and then a boat to get there, but it might give you the time you need to get back on your feet." Jordan glanced quickly at the cane. "So to speak."

"Is that wise?" Ruth found the idea tempting, but tried to temper her enthusiasm. "If my panic attack was triggered by being out on my own, wouldn't being alone on an island make it worse?"

"No, I don't think so." Jordan shook her head. "One of the things that can trigger a panic attack is feeling a lack of control. If you feel like things are out of your hands, such an attack is that much more likely. The reason I suggest the island is exactly because of the seclusion. There is nothing out of your control because there are no other people around. You would be free to relax, walk around the island, read, and basically have the time to feel secure again before adding the element of more people. Of course you would be perfectly free to use my boat if you wanted."

Ruth absolutely loved the open water, and the idea of fishing and sailing for days on end was appealing. She almost said yes, but suddenly wondered at Jordan's motivation. Wasn't there some sort of doctor/patient protocol that would prohibit such an offer? Also, they were practically strangers, aside from the professional consideration.

"Why would you do that for someone who's virtually a stranger?"

"I am your doctor," Jordan answered, "and your physical and mental health are important to me. Consider it a prescription for relaxation."

That explanation was weak at best and Ruth cocked her eyebrow. Jordan had the grace to blush. Both women burst out laughing at the same moment, relieving the tension that had begun to mount.

"Seriously," Ruth prompted after a few more chuckles. "Why?"

Jordan stared intently into Ruth's eyes. "Why did you really come to see me?"

Ruth's heart did a slow roll as the implication impacted in her mind. Suddenly faced with this pivotal moment she had two choices: act as if she was completely confused where Jordan was headed with her question, or admit to her attraction. Ruth wasn't accustomed to being the one to declare her interests. She preferred to be chased, wooed and eventually won. For a second she thought that sounded like she was the prize in a carnival game. Ruth realized that there was absolutely no more time to decide. If she denied the attraction, she would probably lose any possibility of getting to know Jordan better. Faced with that prospect, she decided that one thing she was not was a coward.

She took her courage in hand and responded softly. Her voice was so low she could hardly hear it over the pounding of her own heart. "I think you know perfectly well why I came."

"Yes, I think so. My response to your visit is to offer you a place of solace where I might actually get to see you in something other than a professional environment."

"In that case," Ruth swallowed nervously, "I can't think of anywhere I'd rather vacation than Ghost Island."

She stared at Jordan, lost in open contemplation of the exceptional features. For so long she had surreptitiously glanced at her doctor, noticing a characteristic here, an angle there. Now for the first time, she felt free to indulge her interest in Jordan's features.

Ruth thought Jordan was beyond beautiful. She was exquisite. Ruth had to avoid looking into the blue eyes or she felt that she would fall into them. Unfortunately, she couldn't ignore the full lips that nature had blessed Jordan with. Ruth couldn't help but wonder if they would be as soft as they looked.

A rap at the door interrupted the intensely intimate moment and Ruth could have happily screamed at the intruder to go away. Of course she didn't do that, she wasn't that type of person. This was a hospital and it could be something truly important.

The door swung open without invitation and Ruth looked up in surprise. The visitor was none other than Mark Fuller. Even though Ruth's visit with Jordan wasn't truly important, she felt irritated that Mark had barged right in. Worse, he had interrupted what Ruth considered a pivotal moment in their relationship. He had managed to ruin the entire mood. Although she felt irritated, Ruth resigned herself to his intrusion.

"Doctor Fuller, I wasn't expecting you." Jordan's tone was as cold as liquid nitrogen.

Ruth realized that the statement was not only a greeting, but also her subtle way of pointing out that she hadn't invited him to open the door.

Mark ignored the silent message and grinned at both of them. "I was just picking up some paperwork from my office and heard Ms. Gallagher was visiting. Since you're here, I thought I'd go ahead and give you the paperwork on the trust."

Ruth found it somewhat unlikely that Mark just happened to have the documents with him. She told herself that he could have done most of the work on the trust from his office and took the heavy folder he offered.

"I'll look this over and be in touch with you later."

"Great, well I'll leave you two ladies now. I need some coffee before I try to drive."

Prompted by the cryptic remark, Jordan asked, "Are you going on a trip?"

"I wish it were the vacation you make it sound like. I have a meeting with one of the other contributors a few hours up the coast. Since it's already almost eight, I think I should fortify myself with a little caffeine."

"I thought you were on call?" Ruth asked, remembering their earlier conversation.

“I traded with Doctor Warren. I’ll take his duty next weekend. Well, as fun as this is I’d better get going.”

With a final wave, Mark left. He closed the door quietly behind him. Ruth turned back to Jordan in time to see the cold disdain before she quickly masked the expression. Maybe there was a case of professional rivalry between the two, but Ruth really couldn’t see Jordan being so petty.

“Where were we?” she prompted to change the subject.

Jordan went along with her. “I was just about to give you directions.” She put her glasses back on and picked up a pen. “It’s pretty easy really. You just drive up Highway 1 to New Rollins and take the ferry over to Jessup Bay. You’ll find my boat tied off at the marina. It’s not big, just a glorified sailboat called the Marlin, but she’ll get you where you’re going.”

Jordan finished scratching down the directions so that Ruth wouldn’t have to rely on her memory.

“If you want you could drive down straight away and have almost four days of peace and quiet. Maybe I could even join you on Monday and we could do some deep-sea fishing.”

“That sounds like fun. I love fishing.” Ruth took the sheet of paper containing the directions and stood up. “I should be going, Henry is waiting for me.”

“Oh, wait. Here’s the key to the cabin. If you need to leave before I get there, just stuff the key under the mat by the front door.”

“Isn’t that kind of obvious?” Ruth asked, taking the key.

“Believe me, there’s no worry. Like I said before, there are only four cabins total on the whole island. Not exactly a tourist attraction.”

“All right, I guess I’ll see you some time on Monday.”

“I look forward to it.”

Reluctantly, Ruth turned to leave. She knew that Jordan was watching her as she limped away and hoped she liked what she saw. Ruth tried not to lean on the cane too heavily and walked out into the California night feeling better than she had in a long time. As she stepped out onto the sidewalk, Mark Fuller drove by in a brand new fire-engine-red Ferrari. He waved once before roaring away.

Ruth happily took in the fresh evening breeze. With a bounce in her step, as much as she could manage with a heavy limp, she headed for the car. The forty-minute drive to her home on the outskirts of the Hollywood Hills passed in optimistic anticipation of what the immediate future might hold.

Finally, Henry turned onto a private white rock road that the state didn’t maintain. He paused for only a moment to push a discreet button on the visor. It operated a wrought iron security gate. The gate was anchored in place on either side by a stone fence that encircled the entire grounds. The road led to only one home approximately two miles farther into the woods. This was Ruth’s family estate and an incongruity among the throngs of humanity that resided in the California foothills.

The one hundred thirty-two acres had been purchased in 1801 by Ruth’s great grandfather after he sailed to America from Ireland. The City of Angels promised a bright future for his family even though at the time it was hardly more than a small mining town. Since then, the west coast had grown in leaps and bounds, but the family had refused to sell the property despite the lucrative offers from private citizens and development corporations alike. The stone fence had originally been erected in the nineteenth century to keep squatters off the property. It had

required maintenance over the years and Ruth had spent a summer when she was twelve helping her father make much-needed repairs to the structure.

In the present day, squatters were less of a threat, but the homeless, displaced, roves of gangs, and the odd nut ball were more in keeping with the signs of the times. Now the fence provided a sanctuary, a place to return to when the outside world became overwhelming. Sometimes Ruth was convinced that she would make a very good hermit.

She was proud of her heritage, both Irish and American, and thrilled to be back on the grounds she had known all of her life. When her parents died in a light aircraft crash nine years ago, she had inherited the property. As an only child, she had also inherited the Gallagher fortune and investment companies, leaving her quite well off. Despite the monetary gain the house and acreage meant the most to her. As Henry drove up the long curving driveway in front of the house, Ruth stared up at the brick and mortar structure. Security lights outlined the gabled roof. Ruth felt as though she were coming home for the first time.

She stepped slowly out of the car as Henry held the door. Ruth welcomed the solitude that allowed for the chirping of crickets and the foraging of rabbits and possum. She glanced over at Henry and came to a sudden decision. She would take Jordan up on her offer, so why not get an early start?

“Henry, would you be a dear and get my car ready for tomorrow? I think I’ll take a little drive up the coast. I’ll be gone a few days, maybe through Tuesday, so don’t be concerned.”

“Very good, ma’am. Would you like the Jaguar for tomorrow? If you’re driving up the coast, it will probably be more fun on the curves.”

Ruth briefly considered the suggestion. “Why not? That sounds like a lovely idea.” Obviously, there was no need for her to comment on the fact that he knew of her penchant for speed.

“I’ll see to it right away. Now, it’s been a long day for you. Why don’t you get some rest?”

A yawn caught Ruth unaware and she realized that she was exhausted. Although she hadn’t been through the doors of the manor in a few months, she was too tired to re-familiarize herself with the premises. She headed straight upstairs to her bedroom and took a quick shower in the master bath. Before long, Ruth slid between soft sheets that didn’t smell like institutional soap and chlorine. She stretched out her arm, reaching for the clock on the bedside table. Ruth set her alarm for an early morning outing. She had barely settled onto the pillow before she was sound asleep.

Chapter Four

BEFORE RUTH KNEW it, the alarm was going off. She stretched luxuriously after shutting it off. Happily optimistic at what the day held in store for her, Ruth threw back the covers and hopped out of bed. She hissed with pain as she came down too hard on her still healing leg. Even though the pain was sharp, Ruth remained convinced that her injury was getting better.

Overall, she couldn't really complain. The cast on the right leg had been the last one to go and that had only been a few weeks ago. She was pleased that she could walk at all and didn't require the use of a wheelchair. The cane was a small price to pay for her independence.

After she dressed, Ruth packed a bag and headed downstairs as quickly as possible. She was excited and felt like a child on the first day of summer vacation. When she stepped into the foyer she discovered that someone had laid out a breakfast of coffee and croissant on the table by the front door. The coffee and croissant were steaming hot, showing that someone had been paying attention and possibly heard her alarm go off.

It was probably Henry. He lived in the house along with a few other full-time employees. Although Ruth liked to think that she treated all of her staff like family, Henry had been with her for so long that he was the closest thing to it.

She slung the strap of the bag over her shoulder and grabbed the mug and hot bread before heading out the door. The Jaguar XJ6 idled powerfully in front of the house. The cockpit had been set to a comfortable temperature and Ruth roared away from the house with the beige leather seat cradling her body. She felt like she could conquer the world.

Traffic was light in the early hours, the rush of the morning commute having yet to hit fully. She moved swiftly down the almost deserted streets and swung the powerful car onto the Pacific Coast Highway before she pressed the accelerator toward the floor. Ruth shot forward on the nearly deserted road headed for New Rollins, a small coastal community that couldn't really be called a town. It was a two-hour trip before she would arrive and take the ferry over to Jessup Bay.

Ruth enjoyed driving but was still feeling weakened from her extended hospital stay. An hour and a half into the trip she found herself settling into the vague fugue state induced during long trips, absently rubbing her right knee as it began to throb. With only a half hour left to her destination, she didn't want to pull off the road for a cup of coffee. Ruth decided she could easily make the remaining thirty minutes so continued on, staring down the road in front of her.

Traffic had been almost nonexistent during the trip and she didn't really pay any attention to the few other vehicles. She didn't even notice the other car until a sudden movement in her rearview mirror caught her attention. It was the only other vehicle on this stretch of roadway. It was a dark blue sedan, but it was so close that Ruth couldn't tell what the make was in her mirror. Then, suddenly, it was even closer.

The sedan accelerated quickly and closed the remaining distance. Ruth wondered if the other driver was falling asleep at the wheel. Her eyes were riveted on the mirror, dancing away briefly

to check that she was in the proper lane. The car moved even closer and Ruth hit her horn in an attempt to jolt the driver into awareness.

She quickly decided that the driver was not asleep when the front bumper of the following vehicle bashed into her rear end. He was trying to force her off the road.

Adrenaline surged throughout her body with lightning speed. The screech of tortured metal resonated through her grinding teeth. Ruth's eyes went wide with fright even as she lost the feeling in her fingers from the excitement of fear. A quick glance down assured her that she was indeed holding tightly to the wheel. The Jaguar was built for performance. It held ferociously to the tarmac beneath as the attacker backed off slightly only to careen against her again.

Ruth stared into her rearview mirror trying to identify the madman, but couldn't because the glare from the rising sun bounced off the windshield. She glanced back down at the road in front of her only to discover that she was heading for the guardrail on the narrow, winding road. She attempted to right her vehicle, but yanked too hard on the wheel and overcorrected.

When the encounter began, Ruth had pressed down on the accelerator, increasing her speed in an instinctual effort to escape the assailant. At that speed, the maneuver caused the car to slide into a slight skid. Her heart pounded as Ruth yanked on the wheel again and straightened the car out, but she had unwittingly given her attacker the chance to move up beside her.

The other vehicle had moved between her car and the mountainside, but it hadn't moved up far enough for her to identify the driver. It was entirely possible that the attacker was a complete stranger, so Ruth wondered why she would even think she could identify them to begin with. Then again, that didn't make any sense. She hadn't done anything to instigate such an extreme case of road rage.

She thought all of this must be related to Karl's death. Whomever this was waited until Ruth was alone to try to kill her. Why? She was no threat to them. Maybe they thought she could identify them, or saw something on the mountainside. That was ridiculous. If Ruth could identify them, she would have reported them to the police before now.

Suddenly, the other driver accelerated and shot up on the passenger side of the Jaguar. He rode along the shoulder tight against Ruth's side. She glanced over briefly, having to keep an eye on the winding road as well as the sedan, but she felt she'd just been maneuvered into a bad spot. By slipping the vehicle between Ruth and the mountain, the attacker had moved into the perfect position to force her through the guardrail and over the side.

Ruth couldn't believe it was going to be that easy. There had to be something she could do. She pressed the accelerator all the way to the floor and hung on as the car shot down the road, praying for a miracle.

STATE HIGHWAY PATROLMAN Gary Fowler was sitting in his squad car. He had been a street cop for years and was pretty good at it, so good in fact that he had aced the test for promotion to detective. His wife insisted he take the test, but Gary couldn't picture himself sitting behind a desk pushing paper on a daily basis. With that in mind, he asked instead for a transfer to the traffic division. The shifts weren't as intense and helped satisfy his wife's concern for his well-being when it cut down on his interaction with gang bangers.

After only six months, he was coming to regret the transfer. Gary longed for the streets and a little excitement instead of the boring grind of chasing speeders or arresting drunk drivers. So far, today was no exception.

At a little past nine on a Friday morning he wasn't expecting a great deal of excitement since most of the commuters would be on the major interstates. He'd pulled into a turnout on the winding Pacific Coast Highway to rest his eyes and call Nora. They were expecting their first child in a few months and the morning sickness was a thing of the past. Still, her hormones were raging and Gary had learned that the more concern he showed, the easier things would be for him when he got off shift.

He smiled a little in anticipation and had just flipped open his cell phone when two cars raced past him at breakneck speed. For a moment he thought they were drag racing, but then the smaller details he'd been trained to pay attention to flashed through his mind. The Jaguar in English racing green appeared to be under attack.

Gary tossed the cell phone onto the passenger seat, flipped on his siren and tore after the speeding cars. It was obvious what was happening from the dents and scratches in the Jaguar's rear end and rear passenger door. The panicked expression in the brief glimpse of the driver's face drove that fact home as he grabbed for the mic and called for backup.

"Twenty-five Paul five," Gary shouted, giving his call sign to the dispatcher. "Emergency traffic."

Immediately the dispatcher repeated the call for emergency traffic, letting all other units know not to break into the transmission unless it was an urgent situation. He could be sure that all ears within the range of a radio were listening.

"Twenty-five Paul five, what is your status?"

"Northbound on Pacific Coast Highway twenty miles south of Ventura near Mugu Rock. In pursuit of a 2014 green Jaguar XJ6. License plate Tom Nora Adam six-two-six and a dark blue Lincoln. No plates on the Lincoln."

The phonetic description of the plate would be run through the computer system and give him the identity of one of the parties involved. He would also obtain useful information such as wants, warrants or a previous criminal record. Gary didn't really expect anything useful in this situation since he'd already identified the driver of the Jaguar as the victim of an assault. That being the case, it didn't come as much of a surprise that the pursuing vehicle didn't have any plates. The perpetrator had probably stolen the car expressly for this purpose.

Incredibly, the attacker didn't seem to care that a highway patrol car was pursuing with lights and sirens wailing. The dark sedan swerved and made contact with the Jaguar's front passenger door, pushing steadily as it attempted to force the car over the side.

"The driver of the Lincoln is trying to force the other driver off the road and through the guardrail. I need backup, code three. Have some units set up a roadblock." He calculated velocity and a reasonable amount of time, before he made a quick decision, "Make it seven miles from our current location and keep all traffic off this road."

"Ten-four, twenty-five Paul five. Standby."

For once, Gary was thankful things were so quiet. He knew the situation would get ugly for the driver of the Jaguar if he didn't do something soon. He considered giving her instructions over the P.A. system, but discarded that idea immediately since his intent would be communicated to the attacker as well.

"Damn." He struck the steering wheel in frustration.

Just then, the driver of the Jaguar made the decision for him and he took advantage of the opportunity.

RELIEF FLOODED THROUGH Ruth when the Highway Patrol car swerved onto the road behind them with his sirens screaming. The moment passed quickly when she realized that the killer wasn't just going to pull over to whip out his driver's license and proof of insurance. To prove it, he rammed her again and tried to push her through the guardrail.

With the cop behind them, Ruth knew that the killer had just run out of time. The policeman would have radioed ahead and others would be coming. That meant that whoever this thundering loon was, it was now or never. Ruth's mind raced with desperation. Her life was in her own hands and she had to do something to give the patrolman a chance to rescue her.

"Think, think," she screamed at herself.

She had been trying to race away from this maniac. Maybe it was time to try something radically different. Thought led to immediate action. Ruth lifted her foot off the accelerator and slammed it down on the brakes. The seatbelt bit into her chest and shoulder as her body kept traveling forward. Ruth barely noticed, concentrating instead on holding tightly to the wheel as it vibrated under her hands.

The driver of the sedan reacted too slowly. He was just beginning to brake as the patrol car shot ahead of her. The officer bravely placed his own car between Ruth and her assailant. Ruth expected the unknown assailant to speed away now that the officer had used his vehicle as a buffer, but apparently things wouldn't be that easy. Now the driver targeted the patrol car. Tires squealed and skid marks left an abbreviated black trail on the tarmac. The Lincoln struck the front of the patrol car, the driver intent on pushing it off the edge of the road and into the rocky Pacific shore below. Ruth didn't know much about cars, but she expected the police to drive powerful vehicles. It seemed she had guessed correctly when the Crown Victoria countered the weight of the Lincoln. The officer won the game of leverage and pushed the other car toward the mountain. Ruth thought he was trying to pin the attacker against the rock.

It looked like he would succeed, but then the assailant gunned the engine and pushed back. Rubber squealed and smoke rose from the pavement. Slowly, the Lincoln forced the patrol car into the guardrail. Ruth watched helplessly as the police car slammed into the metal safety rail and broke through, teetering on the edge. One of the rear tires left the ground. Ruth held her breath, wanting to get out of her car and rush to the officer's aid. Self-preservation made her reject that notion. If she left the vehicle, the other driver could squash her where she stood.

Sirens screamed in the distance and Ruth hoped they would arrive in enough time to stop this maniac. She was surprised when the driver of the Lincoln stopped. He backed up slightly, putting a short distance between himself and the officer. The driver hesitated, possibly weighing his options. Ruth couldn't believe it when he suddenly backed away and spun around, taking advantage of the opportunity to speed away to freedom.

Ruth jumped out of the Jaguar and ran toward the patrol car, relieved when the driver's door opened and a man stepped clumsily onto the sloped ground. The car had wedged into the guardrail where the angle was less steep and was in little danger of falling over the edge. The way he held his hand to his head combined with his lack of coordination made Ruth think the officer was somewhat dazed. At least he was still alive.

"Are you all right?" Ruth shouted as she ran toward him.

The officer looked up at the sound of her running feet, reaching simultaneously for his sidearm. Ruth held up her hands to show she wasn't a threat and he stopped.

“I’m all right, ma’am. Are you injured?”

“No,” she replied with a shaky breath. “Thanks to you.”

He didn’t respond, instead reaching for the microphone clipped to his epaulet. For a moment, Ruth thought he was being rude until she heard him speaking.

“Twenty-five Paul five, pursuit terminated one mile from Mugu Rock. I need an APB on the Lincoln. The driver of the Jaguar is uninjured, but I need a tow truck at my twenty. Try to get someone to the Las Posas exit, but they’ll probably be too late. End emergency traffic.”

Once he was finished with the radio, the officer spoke to Ruth. “I’m Gary Fowler, by the way. I did have them set up a roadblock, but I hadn’t expected things to play out so quickly. He’ll probably take Las Posas and miss the roadblock completely.”

Officer Fowler’s radio squawked and Ruth listened in dismay as she deciphered through the police jargon that the Lincoln was found abandoned. She couldn’t imagine where the driver had gone so quickly unless he’d had a partner somewhere nearby. It was entirely possible that he had taken off on foot but without a description, Ruth couldn’t imagine the police finding him.

Two more patrol cars arrived on the scene, but there wasn’t really anything for the officers to do except work traffic control. After another twenty minutes of giving her statement, the encounter began drawing to a close. A tow truck arrived just as Ruth finished telling the officer everything she could remember. She didn’t tell Fowler about her accident a few months ago or that she thought the two incidents were related. In fact, Fowler proposed the same explanation Ruth had first considered when the incident began.

“It was probably someone you pissed off on the road and weren’t even aware of it.”

The idea sounded much more likely when Officer Fowler said it. Ruth thought about the drive up to this point. She had been lost in her own daydreams, not really paying attention. She had heard it said that when a person zoned out while driving, they were really in a semi-hypnotic condition. Ruth couldn’t attest to the veracity of that statement, but found it highly likely that she could have angered the other driver and not even been aware of her transgression.

“If that’s true then someone really has some anger management issues.”

“No argument there. Well, I guess that’s everything, Miss Gallagher. I’ll write the report up today, but it’ll be Monday before it can be processed through administrative channels. You’re welcome to pick up a copy of the report on Tuesday for your insurance company.”

Officer Fowler handed her a business card. “That has the station’s number on it in case you need directions.”

“Thank you, Officer. You’ll never know how relieved I was when I saw you pull on to the road behind us. If you hadn’t been there things might have ended very differently.”

“I didn’t really do that much. You saved yourself. All I did was wreck my car and the captain will probably have my head for that. I’m just glad you’re all right. Now, can I offer you a tow, or call someone for you?”

Ruth smiled at his kindness and shook her head. “No, my car’s a little dented, but drivable. Actually, I was going to take a few days’ vacation, but after this I’ll probably just go home.”

“Didn’t you say that you were going to New Rollins? Well, from what you’ve told me you’re closer to there than you are to home. It’s not far to the exit. I can’t blame you for being unsettled. Something like that would terrify anyone, but I’ll tell you what my wife always tells me. You don’t live your life by hiding in a hole. Trust me, vacations don’t come along often enough. Don’t let some asshole ruin your plans.”

Ruth couldn't really argue with that. She would be at Ghost Island inside an hour. It would take her another two hours to drive home again and she really did want to see Jordan. Ruth decided she would be safe enough at the cabin.

"I guess you have a point. Well, I'd better get back on the road. Thank you, again."

"No problem, ma'am. Have a good weekend."

Ruth checked her mirror before pulling out. She saw the highway patrolman standing near the guardrail. He stood watching the tow truck driver attach a winch to the back of his car. She couldn't imagine what he was thinking, but Ruth knew he had to be just as shaken as she felt. Both of them had almost died at the hands of a maniac and they had no idea why.

She was still a little shaky behind the wheel, but pleased to note that the Jaguar handled with no problems after being batted around like a toy in a cat's playground. Ruth paid close attention to every other car she noticed and adhered strictly to the rules of the road. She thought she was probably overcompensating, but had no intention of going through anything like that harrowing pursuit ever again. She felt wide-awake and the exit came up quickly for New Rollins. Although she wanted to call Jordan and let her know what had happened, Ruth decided that it was more prudent to keep both hands on the wheel. She would call once she had boarded the ferry. Surely, she could wait another ten minutes.

Chapter Five

THE PARKING LOT adjacent to the ferry was packed and Ruth was already behind schedule. Finally, she found a slot in long term parking, grabbed a ticket and raced as quickly as she could with a bum leg for the ferry. Ruth made it just as it was beginning to pull away from the docks.

“Guess it’s your lucky day.” One of the deck hands connected the safety rail behind her. He offered her a friendly smile before rubbing a calloused hand across his cheek stubble.

“Yeah, lucky, that’s me.” Ruth abruptly forgot about the crewman. A stricken look crossed her face and she began patting her waist before delving into her purse frantically. “Damn, where is it?”

“You all right?”

He rolled his eyes when Ruth pulled a cell phone out of her purse with a sigh of relief. She ignored the man and walked away to find a cup of coffee and a seat. She dialed the number Jordan had written down on the directions to Ghost Island as she strolled across the deck. The trip to Jessup Bay would take approximately fifteen minutes. Although the ferry was loaded down, Ruth wasn’t concerned about offending anyone now that she wasn’t driving. Jordan answered the phone on the first ring.

“Hi, Jordan. It’s me, Ruth. I just got to the ferry. Sorry I’m late, but something happened.”

Ruth told her about the harrowing incident on the freeway. She tried to remain as calm as possible and left out the graphic description of exactly how terrified she had been although she was certain Jordan could see past the bravado.

“I never saw the other driver, but I get the feeling that I was extremely lucky. If Officer Fowler hadn’t been there, I don’t know what would have happened. What I don’t understand is, why me? I understand road rage well enough; I’ve even experienced it to some degree. I just can’t imagine what I could have done that was so severe that someone would want to kill me.”

Ruth cringed internally as she heard her voice crack. Her discomfort quickly gave way to curiosity as Jordan hesitated for an instant too long. Finally, Jordan responded with an unexpected change of subject.

“How well do you know Mark Fuller?”

Ruth struggled to keep up with the change of subject. She didn’t think she had bored Jordan to the point of ignoring her tale. If she was asking about Doctor Fuller, he must tie in with this discussion somehow. She weighed her response, considering whether she should confess her instincts about Fuller or maintain an unbiased position based on actual observation. She decided to go for honest.

“I don’t really know him well at all. He was Karl’s cousin, but I only met him a handful of times before the accident. As for my personal feelings, I don’t like him. It’s nothing that he’s done, more of a visceral reaction. Why?”

She heard Jordan take a deep breath and guessed that her question was leading to a lengthy response.

“After you left my office last night I was contacted by security. One of the floor nurses found the narcotics cabinet open and some of the drugs were missing. The lock hadn’t been forced, so it appeared to have been done by someone with a key.”

“Do you think it was Doctor Fuller? I don’t see how that’s possible. I saw him drive away from the front of the hospital as I was leaving. I guess he could have broken into the cabinet before we saw him, but wouldn’t someone have raised the alarm earlier?”

Ruth realized that they didn’t know how long Mark had been in the hospital. He had said he was picking up some paperwork from his office. That errand could have taken seconds.

“I don’t know what to think,” Jordan admitted. “All I can tell you is that I got an anonymous phone call saying that the head nurse had stolen narcotics stashed in her locker.”

Ruth remembered the smile on Trisha Flanagan’s face when she had visited the hospital earlier. Somehow, she couldn’t believe that Trisha’s open, honest countenance hid a liar and a thief. “No way, I can’t believe she would be party to such a thing.”

“Nevertheless, I am required to investigate such a claim and the drugs were there. That’s why I wanted to ask you about Doctor Fuller. He was in the hospital and he also has a key.”

“You believe he’s capable of setting her up like that?”

“I believe he’s capable of more than that. I have a bad feeling about him. I put nothing past him.”

“Including an attempt on my life? Jordan, I’m sorry, but I just don’t see how the two events are connected. I didn’t even really know him a few months ago. Why would he try to kill me?”

Jordan’s immediate response gave Ruth the feeling that she’d been thinking deeply about everything that had been happening for quite some time.

“I admit my evidence is somewhat circumstantial, but from the moment of your accident he has been very noticeable in his actions. He visited you constantly in the hospital even though you barely know him. He approached you with a trust fund in Karl Stein’s name, someone with whom you have a strong emotional tie especially through a shared tragedy. Doctor Fuller was in the hospital when the narcotics went missing last night, yet was noticeably absent when I received the anonymous call. I also believe that it would not be beneath him to have attacked you this morning.”

“But he drove up the coast last night,” Ruth argued. “I saw him leave the hospital and it was not a red Ferrari that tried to force me off the road.”

“He said he had business up the coast.”

That did stop Ruth in her tracks. It was true that he could have just said he had other business. She didn’t recall informing him that she was driving up Pacific Coast Highway this morning, but all he had to do was wait outside her house until she left to follow her. Still, what could he possibly gain from harming her? He was no beneficiary of any policy that she had.

“Ruth, this trust fund...Have you given Mark any money?” Jordan had to be aware that she wasn’t making an accusation against someone without the benefit of any proof.

“Not yet. I just got the paperwork from him last night. The folder is in the car and I haven’t even had time to look at it.”

“Then I must be wrong. If you haven’t signed anything over to him then he really doesn’t have a motive. I guess I’m just grasping at straws.”

“Which means that Nurse Flanagan is guilty? Look, Jordan, I admit it’s a bit of a reach that Doctor Fuller was involved in these incidents. There must be a logical explanation. It makes more sense that I angered someone on the road and they overreacted. Still, just because we don’t know the truth, that doesn’t mean Nurse Flanagan is automatically guilty.”

“I don’t like to believe it either. Trisha denies that she took the drugs and says she doesn’t know how they got into her locker. Unfortunately, the facts speak for themselves and I was required to suspend her pending an investigation. It doesn’t matter at this rate anyway. Trisha resigned this morning.”

“Oh no, that was absolutely the worst thing she could have done. Just the fact that she resigned makes it look like she did something wrong. I don’t believe that for an instant. There has to be another answer.” Ruth was sure Trisha was innocent.

“At least she’s safe.” Jordan’s comment brought them back around full-circle to the original point of Ruth’s call.

“I am too, now.” Ruth returned lightly. “I’m on a crowded ferry heading to a secluded marina where I will take a boat with a crew of one to a nearly deserted island.”

“I agree and you’re probably right about the road rage thing. You’ll be fine at the island and I want you to concentrate on relaxing. I should be able to join you Monday afternoon and then I’ll take you on a tour. The neighbors are suspicious of strangers and we keep an eye out for each other, so I’ll introduce you around.”

“Sounds good.” Ruth eagerly anticipated her upcoming time with alone with Jordan. She could almost picture a fireplace and chilled wine along with lowered lights. “Maybe you can explain why it’s called ‘Ghost’ Island when you get here.”

“Happily. Well, I have to go. I have rounds, but Ruth promise me something.”

“Yes?”

There was a brief pause before Jordan said, “Please be careful.”

She said it softly and Ruth could easily imagine a hidden meaning. “I will. See you soon.”

IT WAS SHAPING up to be a fine California day, full of sunshine and a slightly warm breeze. The ferry crossed steadily toward Jessup Bay with the slapping sound of waves striking the front of the vessel. Ruth leaned against the railing and she closed her blue-gray eyes to inhale the salt-scented air. She basked in the sunlight and could feel the muscles in her body finally begin to relax. The ache in her leg had started to subside, and even with the cane leaning against the railing next to her, Ruth let go of the events of the last few months. With her eyes closed and the briny smell of the sea, she could imagine that she was on a cruise somewhere in the Caribbean.

Voices rose in excitement around her and Ruth opened her eyes as she sensed people pressing next to her. A school of dolphins raced along beside the ferry. One of them playfully leapt from the water, seemingly grinning from ear to ear as it glanced sideways at the foolishly laughing and clapping humans. Ruth thrilled at the display, seeing in it a glimpse of hope for the future.

Although it was a childish fantasy, she desperately wanted to believe that this was a good omen. The dolphins finished their impromptu performance and sped off at phenomenal speed. Soon they were out of sight and Ruth was alone at the railing as people drifted away. Sighing deeply, she glanced down into her now empty Styrofoam cup.

With the disappearance of the dolphins, Ruth’s mood shifted abruptly leaving her feeling empty and helpless. She wasn’t a child anymore and had long ago lost her belief in fairy tales. They had been replaced with cold, hard reality.

In today's world, the witch would successfully capture Hansel and Gretel, but before they died in her oven she would turn them into prostitutes, confiscate all their earnings, and addict them to methamphetamine before hacking them to pieces and cooking them in a stew. After that, she would escape prosecution by claiming that society's intolerance for evil-minded, bad-tempered witches had driven her temporarily insane.

Ruth shook her head and cursed herself for a fool. She decided to push the cynicism away and concentrate on being positive and hoping for the best. There was always a bright side and she could see it looming on the horizon embodied in six feet of sleek, sensual, full-lipped brunette bombshell.

She checked her surroundings and realized that they would soon be docking at Jessup Bay. People were crowding near the landing point, but Ruth decided to sit and let the mob out first. She was on vacation for the next four days and with a new resolve, Ruth determined that she was going to relax.

The next twenty minutes were uneventful as she finally left the ferry and easily found the marina. Jordan's directions proved easy to follow and quite detailed. The Marlin was docked in berth 63 near the end, but Ruth walked toward it as though it was something she did every day. She felt a little funny about just taking someone's ship, even if she did have their permission. The usual marina patrons wouldn't know that. Part of Ruth worried that an overly protective sailor who actually knew Jordan would show up and demand proof that Ruth had a right to accost the vessel.

No one was around at any of the other moorings and Ruth felt relieved. She really had expected someone to challenge her as she carried her bag onto the boat and before she untied the lines to take Jordan's motor yacht from the port.

After a few minutes without the expected dispute, Ruth turned on the trolling motor. She navigated carefully away from the dock, easing past the other vessels anchored nearby. She crossed the buoys marking slower water and finally opened the throttle and grinned at the sensation of freedom induced by the speed and the wind in her hair. The compass beside her showed that she was right on track and Ruth expected to see Ghost Island in another fifteen minutes. Perfect.

Ruth easily lost track of time, watching gulls sailing overhead and the silvery glint of water all around. The powerful motor pushed the ship through the sea, cutting a wedge in the froth so that water lapped up high on each side. Eventually, she spotted a darker shadow across the horizon and instinctively knew the outline was her destination.

When she finally saw the island before her, Ruth could admit to herself that she had been concerned. Sailing to a strange place across the ocean with only word of mouth directions was a little foreboding. She should have known that Jordan's instructions would be without reproach, just as those to the marina itself had been.

Discovering the pier was equally unchallenging as it was clearly marked. Ruth found it by veering slightly to port as she approached the inlet and rounding slightly to the starboard side of the island before entering a small cove. The cove was the picture of tranquility. Palm trees grew tall and thick about fifty feet from the beach and would ensure privacy if she decided a little skinny-dipping was in order. Given the fact that the island was all but deserted, there would be little chance of a peeping tom in the first place.

Ruth shut off the engine and allowed the Marlin to coast the rest of the way to the pier. She moored the vessel with hardly a bump, jumping onto the boards quickly with the anchor line in hand. Ruth felt a slight twinge from her thigh and gave a little hop before hauling back on the

rope. After she tied the ropes to the silver cleats attached to the dock, Ruth headed toward the island. Her eyes scanned the tree line. It was so strange not to hear another living soul other than the birds singing. She traveled down a well-worn path about a quarter of a mile from the beach to find Jordan's cabin. Of course, the word cabin was one that Ruth would apply judiciously. She grinned and realized she should have known that Jordan would not do anything in half measures.

Although not large, the two-story structure boasted an impressive rock chimney. Part of one side butted up against a hillside, giving the impression that the building continued into the earth, although the cost of such an undertaking would be enormous. A few steps, easily traversed, led up to a small porch. The entrance to the cabin would have been an understatement if not for the glass-enclosed sunroom that ran the entire length of the house on the front side.

Ruth looked upward toward the second floor and spotted two separate balconies. She thought they led out from the bedrooms so a person could enjoy the balmy evenings. She reached up and felt in her pocket for the key that would let her inside. The door opened without even a slight squeak and she stepped inside. There was no air of neglect that might be associated with a cabin in an out of the way location. Then again, Jordan had told her that the cabin was her primary residence. She kept an apartment in the city for when she was on call, but this was her home.

The scent of furniture polish and scented candles tickled her nose. Ruth stepped out of the bright sunshine onto the fine Italian marble of the small entryway. Although this was a cabin on an island, Jordan hadn't skimped on making her home elegant. Ruth was also pleased at the welcoming atmosphere of warm earth tones and large windows that allowed in loads of California sunshine.

Ready to put her vacation to good use, Ruth propped her cane against the trim of the front door and dropped her bag beside it. Now it was time to explore her temporary home. She mentally rubbed her hands together in anticipation.

A flight of stairs on the right led to the second floor. She would save the upstairs for last since she assumed it would contain only bedrooms. Nothing interesting up there. At least until Jordan arrived, she thought saucily, trying to ignore the shiver of anticipation. Ruth quickly cautioned her raging libido. Just because she desired Jordan, that didn't mean Jordan felt the same way. From their brief discussion, Ruth knew Jordan wanted to get to know her on a more personal level, but Jordan might prefer to take things slowly.

Ruth nodded and set off through the house. The floor plan was open, allowing for maximum use of a small space. The living room contained the huge rock fireplace and black leather furniture. One leather easy chair was different from the other furnishings, standing out for its blue color. On closer inspection, Ruth could see from the wear that this chair was a favorite. Cracks adorned the leather here and there. Undoubtedly, it was also the most comfortable place to sit.

In the back, French doors led outside onto a wooden deck. Ruth could see a grill through the glass panes but was uninterested for the moment. Her tour of the interior was more of a priority. She walked slowly and considered that her limp was hardly noticeable at this pace. When she saw what she was searching for, her stomach rumbled. It was time to find the kitchen. A low work counter separated it from the living room. Two chairs tucked under the countertop and Ruth couldn't see any other table. She assumed this was where Jordan took her meals.

Ruth thought the space seemed perfect, cozy. From the look of things, Jordan didn't get a lot of company here in this intimate setting for two. She rounded the work area and found that the only appliance on the countertops was a coffee maker. Coffee was just the thing she was looking for. First, she would start a pot and then find something to eat.

While the coffee brewed, Ruth started looking through cupboards and the refrigerator. After a moment, she realized what she was doing and stopped. She chuckled as she realized she had been in the cabin less than ten minutes and was already at home with the surroundings.

Ruth continued looking and was amazed at just how well stocked she found the kitchen. She could make a gourmet meal with just the contents of the cupboards and the fridge. Well, someone could. Ruth was pushing her luck with coffee and sandwiches. Fortunately, luck was on her side. She was happy to see cold cuts, cheese, Dijon mustard and sourdough bread. Lettuce, tomato and purple onion would add to the perfect sandwich.

Ruth wondered if Jordan did her own shopping or had someone do it for her. That last thought caused her to hesitate as she chewed on a piece of prosciutto. As she chewed, she thought back to their conversation. Jordan had stressed the privacy to be found on Ghost Island, mentioning only a few neighbors. She had never said anything about help of any kind.

Finally, Ruth shrugged off her nagging concerns. No one would intrude on her privacy here. Jordan was too thoughtful for that and if it had been a possibility, she would have mentioned it. With that little problem solved, Ruth opened a drawer looking for a knife.

Soon, with coffee and sandwich in hand, she settled in at the small sitting area and took a healthy bite. She felt content with the simple meal and the cabin's comfortable atmosphere. Aside from the serenity, Ruth felt good; better physically than she had in months. Even after the excitement this morning, she felt like things were looking up.

Ghost Island was just what she needed. Ruth savored a sip from her coffee and glanced around, mentally planning the rest of her day. She still tired easily since the accident and the trip along the coast had taken up a great deal of her reserves. Although she fully intended to explore the rest of the island while she was here, Ruth needed pursuits that were more sedentary.

A bookshelf full of hard-backed books occupied one corner of the living room. Ruth thought she would take a short walk on the beach to help digest her meal. After that and a decadent soak in the tub she hoped existed upstairs, she would light a fire and do some reading. The fire wasn't necessary for warmth but she would enjoy it. Ruth only hoped there would be something to read besides medical reference materials.

Ruth finished eating, rinsed her plate and slipped it into the dishwasher before topping off her coffee. She carried the mug with her to the front door and grabbed her bag from where she'd left it beside the entryway. Hefting the strap over her shoulder, she grabbed hold of the rail for support. Thankfully, there weren't many steps and it wasn't as hard as she thought it might be. The mahogany rail was polished to a high sheen and pleasantly cool under her palm. The carpet felt thick underfoot and she couldn't hear any creaking from loose treads. At the top of the stairs, a door opened to the right before the landing led into a short hallway.

Unsure of the layout, Ruth figured process of elimination was the way to go. She entered the first room she came to and then closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. She took in the heady scent of Jordan's subtle perfume. This was clearly her room, but Ruth couldn't force herself to leave. She allowed the strap to slide down her arm before dropping the bag to the floor and opening her eyes.

Ruth noticed the white chenille spread on the queen-sized bed and the fine cherry wood furniture as she moved around the room. Her fingertips rested briefly on a wall photo of Jordan and an older couple. Judging by the resemblance and the smiles, they were her parents. The small family seemed close. An ornate porcelain music box sat in the center of the dresser along with a hairbrush and a partial roll of cherry lifesavers.

A bemused smile rested on Ruth's face when she found the roll of candy. There was something innocent about it that touched her heart. She turned away and took a deep breath feeling as though her heart would burst.

"If I'm not in love," she mused aloud, "I'm not far from it."

The knowledge seemed a bit ironic. Ruth had known Jordan for a few months now, but in a strictly professional capacity. Her desire had been present from the start, but it was only very recently that she'd even entertained the possibility of something more.

Finally, she walked toward an open doorway in the far corner. It was clearly an adjoining bathroom, but she was curious about the layout. The room was larger than she would have expected, housing a large, deep garden tub backed by a stain-glass wall.

The artist had decorated the glass with a scene straight out of Ruth's fairytales. Trees grew straight and tall, populated with birds and squirrels. The one-dimensional air of the scene hosted butterflies while nymphs frolicked hand in hand over a wooded trail. Overhead, porcelain fixtures trimmed in gold and pink cast inviting light and a distinctly feminine atmosphere wholly in keeping with Ruth's impression of Jordan.

After absorbing the gentle atmosphere, Ruth moved on. She picked up her bag, eager to see what the other rooms looked like. She'd been wrong earlier, assuming that there would be nothing interesting to see on this floor.

The next room to the left was a small, clean and apparently overly organized office. A computer, printer and scanner took up the surface of the desk and a file cabinet stood in the corner. The impression Ruth garnered from the impersonal room was that Jordan didn't spend a lot of time in here. Her personality shown clearly everywhere else, but this room was without color, without flavor. Ruth didn't linger. The hallway ended at another doorway and she entered the guest room.

She dropped her bag in front of an exquisite low dresser and sighed with relief at ridding herself of the burden before looking around. This chest held a large mirror and she glanced at her reflection, pleased to note a healthy touch of pink in her cheeks. Her eyes held a glow of happiness that hadn't been present in a long time.

Ruth looked away to check out the room. The bed here was also queen-sized, covered in a soft, light green quilt. Touching it, she was delighted at the thickness and thought it must be handmade. Heavy curtains covered the windows and Ruth slid them back to gaze out onto the island. She gasped with surprise and delight at the view of the inlet. The sun shone off the water making it sparkle like a jewel. She guessed that Jordan's room would have an equally stunning view as she considered the cabin's layout. The glimpse from Jordan's window would be of the beach and the pier. This was a magnificent place and Ruth could see why Jordan had made her home here. If Ruth lived here, she would never leave.

The restroom sat to the right of this bedroom and she was curious to see how Jordan had it decorated. She crossed the threshold, simultaneously flipping on the light against the encroaching darkness. She wasn't disappointed. Sunshine yellow featured as the predominant color, framing the hanging light fixture and shining brightly from the stained glass that featured brightly colored parrots.

As much as she'd love to stand here admiring the view, Ruth suddenly had an overwhelming urge to be on the beach with the surf washing over her feet. She used the facilities and washed her face quickly before going back into the bedroom and unpacking her bag.

Ruth laid out her clothing in the unoccupied drawers, smoothing them briefly before removing a pair of shorts, a T-shirt and pair of socks from her supplies. Then she stripped off her

traveling clothes, tossing them across the bed to deal with later before changing. Her outfit was complete with tennis shoes and she was ready to go.

Ruth decided to leave the cane at the cabin for the duration of this excursion. Since she planned to attempt to do without it during her vacation, she might as well start now. She could always fall back on it later if it proved impractical to do without.

As quickly as possible, she was out of the cabin and retracing her earlier steps to the beach. It was now late afternoon, and the sun was just starting to descend. With a few hours of sunshine left, she was going to take full advantage of it. Ruth reached the edge of the tree line and she stopped to take off her shoes and socks. She left them where she stood. Then she walked quickly toward the surf. She had spent a great deal of time at the beach before the accident, and discovered now how much she had missed it. Maybe she would take the boat out tomorrow, not to fish since deep-sea fishing required a great deal of stamina if she should actually hook something. She just wanted a little pleasure cruise to enjoy the fresh air and get a little sun.

Ruth considered the sun and thought she should be careful how long she spent outdoors. It had been a long time since she had been out for very long and she would burn easily.

“I need to put sunscreen in the bag tomorrow.”

With the sand between her toes and the water washing up to her ankles, Ruth walked for a while. With each step she took, her feet sank slightly into the wet sand and she felt that much farther from her troubles. She knew that she would be sore later but right now, she felt like she could walk all the way around the island.

That thought proved impossible a short while later when she came up to a place where the trees grew all the way down to the water. There was a small inlet here and she followed it, unsurprised when the sea gave way to a small tributary. Pleased and feeling on the edge of discovery, Ruth continued to follow where the creek would lead.

Trees grew thicker here but weren't so close together as to make things difficult. In fact, she found it charming. A small game trail led the way, twisting and turning as it followed closely beside the water. She rounded a corner and came upon an amazing sight. The tributary ended in a large pond of water that was fed by a waterfall. Fresh water fell over rocks that had been polished like glass over countless eons before crashing into the pond below. Birds sang in the trees undaunted by the human visitor, but the most stunning sight was all of the butterflies. There were hundreds of them in the air, flitting between flowers and resting on rocks and grass.

Ruth felt almost breathless at the display and dropped to her knees where she was so she wouldn't disturb anything. A tree trunk behind her made a good backrest and she prepared to spend hours staring at the view. Here in this place with the beauty of the world displayed before her, she could almost believe that there was no evil. She could see the cycle of life in front of her, embodied in the timeless grace of the trees and the waterfall. She had read somewhere that butterflies only lived eight hours after emerging from their cocoon, but they didn't mourn the brevity of their lives. They immersed themselves in what time they had in unending movement. It was a lesson she took to heart, and with a decision made she looked to the future with a newness of hope that she hadn't experienced in a very long time.

In the end, it was the darkening sky and the soreness in her backside that forced Ruth from the wonderful setting she had discovered. It was time to be heading back since she really wasn't accustomed to her surroundings. If she wasn't careful, she could still get lost in the gloom. Back in these trees, she couldn't hear the breaking of surf to guide her back to the beach. Ruth was going to have to move quickly to get back before it became too dark.

The trip back took a little longer than she expected and she was tired. Still, the strain in her muscles was a good thing. The fatigue she felt was induced from exercise, not from injury.

Ruth made it to the cabin with little daylight to spare. She took a lengthy soak in the tub, taking time to inspect the line of the scar on her leg. She was pleased with how it was healing. The mark began in the middle of her thigh and ran in a jagged line to the inside of her knee, but it wasn't the unsightly raised line of a keloid. Once the injury completely healed, Ruth would have a thin scar that would fade and eventually prove difficult to detect. Her doctors had been very good.

She remembered that she wanted to check out Jordan's supply of reading material and finally forced herself to leave the hot water. Jordan wouldn't be in tonight so with no intention of getting dressed, Ruth threw on a nightgown and a robe before heading downstairs. She started a fresh pot of coffee before heading into the living room.

Ruth knelt down by the bookcase. Her fingertips slid across the spines of the books and she was surprised to discover that not one of them was a medical tome. In fact, from the titles she gleaned they were works of fiction. Ruth pulled a few of them from the shelf to learn that they were of the romantic genre, which was just what she needed tonight. A title caught her eye, *Love's Embrace*. Ruth pulled the novel from the shelf to read the summary on the back, but what she found left her mouth hanging open in disbelief.

The novel wasn't a typical mainstream bodice-ripper. Instead, Ruth discovered it was lesbian romance. Now this was something she could get behind. Intrigued, she forgot about the coffee and carried the volume to the recliner. The writing was natural and easy to slip into, so easy that Ruth soon lost all track of time as she became engrossed in the story.

Chapter Six

AT A LITTLE after eight in the morning, Jordan Pierce had already put in three hours at the hospital. She hadn't been able to sleep for thinking of Ruth waiting at home for her. When she had slept, it was to dream of walking in on Ruth innocently slumbering in her bed. In the dream, Jordan had slipped off her clothing and climbed into bed with Ruth. Warm skin had pressed sweetly against her as she slipped under the covers and took Ruth into her arms.

Just as Ruth embraced her, Jordan had snapped awake. Her heart thundered with arousal and her breath came in short bursts. There was no possibility of going back to sleep so she had given up and taken a long, cold shower before dressing for work. As soon as she was fully awake, Jordan's thoughts turned to work related issues and the missing narcotics.

Trisha Flanagan had been on her mind a lot, always present in the recesses of her consciousness. Jordan had a hard time believing that she was stealing drugs. She certainly couldn't believe that Trisha would have been stupid enough to stash them in her locker for anyone to find in an impromptu search. That could only mean that someone else had set her up. The whole conundrum left Jordan with two burning questions. Who would do that and why? Jordan suspected she knew the "who," but as to the other part of that equation, she hadn't a clue.

With that weighing on her mind, Jordan had checked the narcotics cabinet and the pharmacy on the main floor as soon as she arrived at the hospital. Everything had been in order. Since then, Jordan had occupied her time working on the never-ending pile of paperwork that crossed her desk. She wanted to do more for Trisha, but she wasn't a forensic investigator and didn't have access to fingerprinting equipment. Even if she did, Mark Fuller's fingerprints were sure to be present on the chest. Jordan felt sure she would find fingerprints matching several people at the hospital. Just because they were present wasn't in itself an indication of guilt.

She kept remembering what Ruth had said. She saw Mark Fuller leaving the hospital at the same time she did. Ruth didn't believe Mark was involved in the theft and without proof Jordan had no choice but to let the police handle the inquiry. All Jordan could do was concentrate on her work. Her patients deserved a physician who put their welfare before all other concerns, regardless of her personal unease. At eight o'clock, Jordan began her rounds.

A patient had fractured his leg in four places after a skiing accident in Big Bear. He was the first patient on her agenda and it took only a few minutes to ensure that he was recovering nicely. He refused his medication by reaching instead for her backside and chuckling when she nimbly avoided the contact.

"Lots of practice dodging sickos like myself?" He sounded cheerful, not at all offended by her evasion.

"Something like that," Jordan answered with a smile. "Somehow, I think you do it just to test my reflexes. If you actually meant it your wife would have murdered you a long time ago."

Mr. Patterson rolled his eyes. "Boy, have you got that right. If I even seriously looked at another woman, she'd have my family jewels and I'd be singing in the Vienna Boys Choir."

Jordan snorted in disbelief. "As if you can sing."

She let him know he could go home later in the day and continued on her rounds. Patterson was a good man and she didn't consider him a serious threat in the sexual assault department. As much as he teased, Jordan had seen him with his wife a few times and witnessed the open adoration on his face.

Sometimes she wondered why he persisted in his adolescent flirtations when he so clearly wasn't interested. Did he think that a man worth four million dollars was supposed to act like that? She honestly didn't know, but it seemed crazy that society expected a man of means to conduct himself like a rogue.

Crazy seemed to be the theme lately though. Jordan was beginning to think that the world at large was going stark-raving loony tunes and that she was the only sane person in a sea of madness. Then again, what she was feeling for Ruth Gallagher could hardly be termed balanced. Jordan glanced casually into the medication room as she passed by in the hallway and stopped dead in her tracks.

Jordan closed her eyes tightly and shook her head thinking that she must surely be mistaken. When she opened them again, the scene seemed surreal and the details were so sharp that she thought that surely she must be in shock. Sunshine streamed into the room so brightly it felt like it was trying to peel the corneas off her eyes. The fizz and crackle of electricity flowing through the fluorescent lights resonated off her eardrums and the cool hospital air caused a chill of dread to trickle down her spine. Still, it was what she saw that generated the overload of her other senses.

It couldn't be. She had been here less than fifteen minutes ago and it hadn't been this way. Trisha Flanagan was no longer working for the hospital. She'd resigned two days ago, so it couldn't possibly be her. Yet as Jordan looked again, she couldn't deny the truth. The medications cabinet was open and just from a brief passing glance it looked as though most of the contents were missing.

Jordan entered the room and approached the cabinet slowly as though afraid something would jump out and bite her. Nothing moved as she approached the sagging glass door, but what she saw confirmed her suspicions. Most of the usual inventory was gone. Jordan reached out to check the lock and stopped. If this were a crime scene, which she highly suspected, she didn't want to chance leaving fingerprints or DNA.

All doctors assigned to the hospital had keys to fit the cabinets, but Jordan rarely touched the medications cabinets. She leaned toward writing prescriptions for the pharmacy staff to fill. On the rare occasions that she dispensed medication, she tended to hand out boxes of samples free of charge as agreed by pharmaceutical companies and the hospital board.

The only thing she could do was call security. This was their job, not that it would do any good. The thief was long gone and no doubt all security would do was file a report. She glanced up at the corner of the room and saw the security camera. Maybe she could do something after all. Security wouldn't be in a hurry considering it was already too late to do anything, but Jordan knew that the crime had just occurred. If she was fast enough, she just might be able to catch the culprit.

After calling security and leaving the scene in their capable hands, she headed to the basement. In this particular hospital, the camera operations were set up on the lower level. The Board of Trustees had insisted on it, citing that their elite clientele would be put off upon seeing a locked doorway with the word "Security" emblazoned on it.

Jordan knew the security officers on site, but few of them well. The only one she shared any kind of friendly relationship with was Ozzie Blaine, who was as round as he was jovial. As large

as he was, it was difficult to picture him doing much more than eating chocolate donuts and pouring down gallons of highly sugared coffee. In his case, appearances were deceiving. The man was also six feet, four inches tall and she had seen him hold down highly combative junkies that were convinced he was a flesh-eating troll intent on devouring them with extreme prejudice.

He was also a highly honorable man that Jordan was sure believed in the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus. He believed in good and evil and was decidedly on the side of good. For that reason, she knew she could ask for his help.

“Morning, Doctor Pierce.” Ozzie greeted her while wiping at the powdered sugar clinging tenaciously to his mustache. “What are you doing down here in this hole?”

“Hi, Ozzie. I wish that I were here under better circumstances, but there was a break in on the first floor. The medications cabinet in room one-eighteen was broken into and I was wondering if I could see the security footage.”

He frowned. “You better believe it, Doc. If someone broke in during my watch, I want to know about it.”

Break-ins and criminal activity were a rare occurrence at Mount Sinai. Although the hospital utilized security tapes, they didn’t have a cadre of officers to view the monitors around the clock. It was possible no one witnessed the theft, but the cameras would still record everything. No one had bothered to check them before because it seemed like an open and shut case against Trisha Flanagan.

“When did this happen?” Ozzie reached for the monitor controls for the room in question.

“Just about fifteen or twenty minutes ago.”

Ozzie punched the rewind button on the camera. “A fresh tape is inserted at the beginning of each shift so it won’t take long to rewind. You can see the time indicator here on the bottom. I’ll back it up twenty-five minutes just to cover our bases.”

Both of them watched the empty room for a few minutes until Ozzie became bored. “Why don’t we fast forward until we see someone come into the room?” He didn’t wait for an answer as he suited actions to words. In only a few seconds, there was movement on the screen.

“Stop,” Jordan said.

Ozzie pushed the play button and they watched as a candy striper walked into the room and grabbed a wheeled cart. She left quickly and never went near the narcotics in the corner. Jordan let out a breath in disappointment, but continued watching the screen. Just as she was beginning to give up, a man entered the room. He was tall, judging from the image on the screen, and dark haired. Other than that, Jordan could discern nothing else about him although he seemed familiar. Of particular note was the fact that he studiously avoided the camera. He kept his back to the camera or his head turned away toward the window.

The man walked straight over to the cabinet, withdrawing a set of keys as he went. The lock turned under his key in less than a second, and Jordan guessed it was something he did regularly. If he were one of the doctors then it very well could be, if not for his suspicious behavior. He didn’t check the labels looking for anything in particular, just swept the contents from the shelves into the deep pockets of his lab coat.

He was very efficient, emptying the cabinet in a few seconds. When he was finished, he didn’t bother to re-lock the door. He simply turned away and left the room as quickly as possible. At no time did Jordan see his face, but just as he exited the left side of the screen, she saw something else.

“Stop there.” Jordan took an involuntary step toward the camera.

“What is it?” Ozzie asked loudly in his excitement.

The man was still a mystery, but Jordan was almost sure she knew who he was. Her biggest clue was revealed by what she saw through the same window where she had almost been blinded earlier. The parking lot was visible through the open blinds and sitting dead center in the frame outlined by the window was a red Ferrari Testarossa.

There was only one person, one doctor, she knew who drove such a vehicle and that was Mark Fuller. Unfortunately, she couldn't go to the police or even afford to mention her suspicions to poor Ozzie. Doctor Fuller had every right to park in the parking lot and even to remove drugs from the narcotics cabinet. He worked at the hospital. Jordan was sure that he could come up with some reason for having been in the medication room should she choose to confront him about it. All of her evidence was circumstantial and driven by crude instinct.

Still, the film did give her enough to talk to the Hospital Review Board about Trisha Flanagan. If she could convince them that there was some question about Trisha's guilt, perhaps they could talk her into reconsidering her decision to resign. Of course, she'd still remain on suspension until the matter was resolved. That would be a lot more preferable to dismissing her out of hand and tarnishing her career or allowing her to quit.

"It's too bad we couldn't see his face. Of course we'll have to give the police a copy of this tape, but do you mind if I borrow it for a while first? I promise to return it."

"I don't know, Doc. It's one thing to show you the footage, but that's evidence and I could lose my job."

Jordan knew he was right, but wasn't prepared to give up yet. "Just give me until the end of the shift. I promise I'll have it back to you by then. I could make a copy, but I don't have time and the police will want the original."

"All right, but if I don't hear from you by five o'clock, I'm going to track you down."

"I understand."

Ozzie ejected the tape and Jordan walked out with a grim expression on her face. Things were looking up, she thought, but now she had to find concrete evidence. All along, she had suspected Fuller to be guilty of something, but taking drugs and framing an innocent young woman was low even for him. Now that she had the tape, Jordan intended to find out what he was up to and prove Trisha Flanagan's innocence.

Jordan wanted to review the tape again in privacy. She hoped that she could spot something she hadn't the first time, something that would lead to definitive proof of the thief's identity.

RUTH DIDN'T REALIZE how deeply engrossed in the story she had become until her cell phone rang. The unexpected sound made her look around in momentary confusion before her distracted mind was able to identify the source. She kept the thumb of her left hand inside the book to mark her place as she reached for the phone.

"Hello?"

"I was beginning to think you wouldn't answer."

The soft, slightly amused voice sent shivers of pleasure down Ruth's spine while a huge grin spread across her face. "Well, it's really not my fault. I found this amazing book at your cabin and I just can't put it down. The characters have incredible depth and believability. I can especially relate to the one named Caroline."

A pause at the other end was the only response. Ruth had just begun to believe that she had lost the connection when Jordan finally responded. "What can I say? I prefer to read stories that pertain to my own circumstances...or orientation if you prefer."

Jordan sounded amused rather than embarrassed and Ruth smiled in response. "You don't need to justify anything to me, I understand. I guess my life must be pretty sheltered because I never realized there was this type of fiction out there."

"I'm glad you like the book. I promise to show you how to find other reading material, but we'll check into that later. How does that sound?"

"Wonderful idea, but later is probably a wise idea. I'd rather focus on spending some quality time with my favorite doctor."

"I'm looking forward to that as well. Listen, I'm actually calling with some news."

"I'm all ears."

"Your ears aren't even big. I should know, I've looked inside them often enough. Seriously though, this morning someone broke into the narcotics cabinet on my floor."

"And that's good news?"

"In my defense, I said I had news. I'm not so sure it's good, at least not in itself. There's good and bad. The good is that after reviewing the security footage, it casts serious doubt on Trisha Flanagan's guilt and a certain amount of credence to the theory that she was set up."

"That's wonderful," Ruth replied before she put together the rest of what Jordan had said. "Who did you say reviewed the footage?"

"I did. Actually, the chief of security and I reviewed it together."

"What did you see?"

"Nothing concrete, but the film showed a man with a key emptying the cabinet. He looked a lot like Mark Fuller, but he never faced the camera directly so my evidence is more instinct than hard fact."

"So you're playing junior detective?" Ruth teased.

"I guess you could say that. To be honest I like the sound of that. Do you think I missed my calling?"

Ruth thought about the question for a second before she answered. "I think maybe you did. Still, Jordan, a lot of men in the United States look like Doctor Fuller. What are you going to tell the police? A tall man with dark hair stole drugs from the hospital? Don't get me wrong, I think you're terrific but you've never liked Doctor Fuller. Even before I was released from the hospital, I sensed that you distrusted him."

"Do you think I've allowed my personal feelings about the man to cloud my judgment?"

Ruth didn't believe Jordan was being defensive when she asked the question. She was a fair person and honestly wanted to know if Ruth though she was being out of line by accusing him.

"Not at all. You've known him for a long time, a few years from what I understand. Subconsciously you would know his movements, his body language, and would probably recognize him from behind if he wore a monkey suit complete with a hand-crank and a little hat. I believe you, but you're going to have to come up with some real proof for the police. Just don't confront him directly, all right?"

"Please don't worry. My part in this affair is complete. I've reported what I know and now it's for security, the police and the hospital administrators to investigate from here."

"Good, I'd hate to think you were so busy following him around that you wouldn't come home." Ruth deliberately segued into her favorite topic. She could hear the smile in Jordan's voice when she responded.

“As I told you, I have to work tomorrow, but I was thinking of leaving here at noon and coming out to the island. I don’t have any patients to see in the afternoon so I wouldn’t be too negligent. I’d have to leave early Tuesday though to pull my last shift, but I’d have a few days off after that.”

“That would be lovely. Maybe we could have a picnic on the beach and enjoy the fresh air. I found the most wonderful spot today that I think would be perfect.”

“You’ve been exploring,” Jordan accused gently.

“Guilty as charged.”

Unexpectedly Jordan blurted out, “Ruth, do me a favor? Be careful. It still bothers me that someone tried to run you off the highway. I’m worried it may have something to do with what happened a few months ago.”

“Now it’s my turn to reassure you. That was an isolated incident. It could have happened to anyone. For argument’s sake, if someone was really out to get me they could have been hiding on the ferry, watching me. Even if I did miss someone lurking in the shadows, I would have noticed if they had followed me to the marina or even to the island. I’m perfectly safe.”

“All right, you have a point. Maybe I’m just being paranoid with all the weird stuff going on around here. I’d better get back to work before my patients start threatening to sue me for malpractice.”

“That would never happen, but I’ll let you go anyway. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow. What time do you think you’ll be at Jessup Bay?”

“I plan to leave here by twelve thirty at the latest. That’ll put me in time for the two forty-five ferry with time to spare. I should reach Jessup Bay by three.”

Ruth thought that would work out well for the surprise she was already planning. “Call me if you get held up?”

“I promise.”

A few moments later, they ended the call and Ruth knew it was going to be a long night. She knew that when she did dream, Jordan would have the starring role. She looked up at the wall clock and realized it was already quite late. Ruth checked her page number and then placed the novel on the coffee table. It was time for bed. Her eyes burned from reading so long and she didn’t want to be worn out when Jordan arrived tomorrow.

Ruth climbed the stairs and prepared for bed. For a moment, she debated sleeping in the guest room or slipping into Jordan’s bed. In the end, she decided sleeping in Jordan’s room would be too presumptuous at this stage. The sheets in the spare room were cool and soft on her skin. Ruth settled down and tried to relax.

She thought she would sleep like a baby, but the night was anything but restful. Ruth was very comfortable on the thick mattress and between the soft sheets. She had fallen asleep quickly enough, but disjointed nightmare images and half-heard voices awakened her within forty-five minutes of drifting off. The image of her Jaguar going through the guardrail and into the ocean was still holding center court in her mind when Ruth realized she was sitting straight up in bed with her heart pounding.

“It’s just a dream,” she uttered aloud to hear her own voice. Although a little shaky, it helped center her. Ruth repeated the phrase again because it made her feel better.

After taking a deep breath, she threw back the covers and walked to the bathroom. She drew a palm over her sweaty brow and grimaced at the cold, wet sensation. She rinsed the sweat from her face and blotted it dry with a guest towel, drawing comfort from the slightly scratchy terrycloth. She replaced the towel over the bar and ran cold water from the tap into a Dixie cup.

The nightmare had faded and the shaking in her limbs subsided. Ruth went back into the bedroom determined to get some restful sleep when a sound near the window caught her attention. She froze in place and pressed against the wall. There was something furtive about the noise. It wasn't loud, more like a soft scraping, or light scratching. As much as Ruth had been through in the last year, she had learned to trust her instincts and in this case they were telling her that she wasn't alone.

Silently, she berated herself. How stupid could she have been? She had traveled to an almost deserted island with a maniacal killer still on the loose. The police had never found Karl's attacker.

Her nightmare of the Jaguar going over the rail flashed through her mind again. That hadn't happened in reality, but Ruth knew that if assaulted here, face-to-face, the outcome would certainly be quite different. There were three other cabins on the island, but they were much too far away to hear a lone, frightened woman call for help.

The sound came again from near the window. Ruth held her breath and slowly inched toward the noise. The house was locked but that didn't mean anything. If someone wanted in, they could simply pick a lock or break a window. Was that happening here? She stepped up to the window frame and slowly, carefully leaned around the edge to see what was happening. The sound repeated and with it came a slight movement that caught her eye.

When she identified the source of the sound, Ruth let her breath out on a laugh. It was just the breeze causing the frond of a palm tree to move and scrape against the glass.

"Absolutely ridiculous. Talk about paranoid."

Ruth slid back into bed, realizing she really was safe. No one had followed her to the island and no one was after her anymore. Karl had been the original target for some unknown reason. She just had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. There hadn't been any other incidents for months, until the car chase on the Coast Highway. Examined in that light, the entire episode began to look less sinister.

Yes, surely that was it. She had responded to the other driver the same way she had reacted to the old man in the cemetery. The events had been frightening without context and completely unrelated. Ruth felt reassured that no one was out to get her. She snuggled back under the covers and tried to find a comfortable spot. Her mind was still too active to allow her to sleep, but she remained in bed knowing she needed to rest if nothing else.

Eventually she dozed off but sleep was light during which she tossed and turned frequently, waking often. When the sky began to brighten with the coming dawn, Ruth was already awake and planning for a full day.

Ruth spent the morning getting the feel for the Marlin. She brought a light lunch with her to the boat. She wore a black one-piece swimsuit beneath her shorts and tank top and carried the novel she had started the night before. When she began her excursion, Ruth had donned a long-sleeved, cotton shirt to ward off the early morning chill, while ankle socks and deck shoes completed her wardrobe.

She had deliberately left the cane behind, pleased with the fact that she had only a slight limp. Ruth started with a short walk on the beach to limber up before setting out for the yacht. After sailing for a while, she took a swim in the cove that she had discovered the day before. It would be the perfect place for a picnic with Jordan.

Ruth was aware of a need to keep an eye on the time since she wanted to surprise Jordan by picking her up at the ferry. She just hoped Jordan didn't expect her to cook anything.

Fifteen minutes before the ferry was due to dock, Ruth headed out. She had a slight sunburn but felt refreshed by the sea air as she slipped the Marlin into its berth and arrived a few minutes early. She hadn't heard from Jordan all day and nervously hoped she was still on schedule. Ruth paced the docks and watched the slow moving vehicle finally pull into port. Deck hands lowered the safety ropes to the waiting crew who tied them off.

Jordan was one of the last off and Ruth watched her walk across the planks. She could feel the iciness of nerves in her fingertips, but she couldn't stop smiling in delight. Jordan saw her and smiled back, seeming pleased to find Ruth waiting for her on the dock.

"This is an unexpected surprise."

"A nice one, I hope." Ruth felt a little like an immature schoolgirl with a crush.

"You're doing so much better. No cane?"

"Nope, I feel a lot stronger. I don't think I'll need it anymore."

"That's wonderful, just don't be too stubborn. If you need it, use it. I'd hate to see you re-injure yourself."

The docks were crowded, thick with people coming and going. An old man in a wrinkled brown coat bumped shoulders hard with Jordan, knocking her back a pace. Neither Jordan nor Ruth paid much attention to him until they heard him complain in a harsh voice.

"Watch where you're going."

"I'm so sorry," Jordan began, but the man never slowed down. He simply plowed his way through the throng of people.

Ruth and Jordan exchanged confused glances.

"I guess there's no accounting for manners," Ruth said, but something about the stranger bothered her. She was convinced that she had seen him somewhere before. There was something familiar in his walk, and the gray of his beard and heavy wrinkles seemed mismatched with the straight set of his shoulders and the spryness of his stride.

"Is something wrong?" Jordan glanced between Ruth and the stranger.

Ruth shook her head. "No, not really. Look, I don't want to spoil this day because of a rude stranger. Let's talk about something else."

"Great idea, what would you like to talk about?"

"Well, believe it or not I did a little exploring of your island yesterday and I found a great place for a picnic."

"Do tell." Jordan played along with a smile on her full lips.

"Are you hungry?"

"Famished."

Ruth's stomach did a slow roll as her mind centered on topics that had little to do with food. She tried not to let her baser instincts control her mouth and opted for keeping the subject neutral. There would be time for other things later if they were both willing.

"Then you're in luck. As it happens, I packed a picnic lunch."

Chapter Seven

THE DAY FELT a little brighter as they walked to the Marlin. They made small talk during the trip to Ghost Island about nothing in particular. If someone had asked her later what they talked about, Ruth couldn't have said. She could only bask in the glow of Jordan's presence and enjoy the feel of the sun on slightly flushed skin.

After mooring at the island, Ruth waited while Jordan took a quick shower in order to wash off the medicinal scent of the hospital. When she emerged from upstairs, Ruth could see the outlines of a bikini beneath her top. She couldn't wait to see what Jordan looked like in the revealing costume. They spent the afternoon at the cove Ruth had discovered. She wasn't surprised to find that the location was one of Jordan's favorites on the island.

"It was actually the deciding factor on purchasing my home here," Jordan admitted as they lay on towels in the sun.

"I can't blame you, it's a wonderful place. I think this vacation is just what I needed."

"Feeling pretty good about yourself, are you?" Jordan teased.

Ruth was happy to take up the challenge. "Enough to race you to the water." She had been waiting for Jordan to strip down to her bathing suit and couldn't wait any longer. Someone had to take the initiative.

She jumped up and stripped off her shirt before Jordan could catch on to what she meant. Then Jordan stood with a grin and began quickly removing her own clothing. Ruth had already discarded her shoes and socks and stopped to watch as Jordan removed her shirt. Ruth's face grew warm when Jordan shoved her shorts down her legs.

"You're gorgeous."

Jordan flushed at the compliment. "I thought you wanted to swim."

"I do." It was true, but suddenly Ruth wasn't in such a great hurry.

When they were ready, Ruth took Jordan's hand. It took a lot of courage for her to make such a move and she was pleased when Jordan didn't resist. The water was colder than Ruth expected and she splashed around vigorously for a few moments trying to get accustomed to the temperature.

Jordan chose to submerge completely. As she swam under the water, Ruth took the opportunity to stare at her. From what she could see through the water, Jordan really was magnificent. She was all sinew and hard little muscles. Her tummy was flat and her thighs lean. Jordan swam around behind Ruth and surfaced.

Ruth spun around and splashed water at her.

Jordan laughed and splashed water back at her. They were fairly close to one another splashing and laughing when their legs brushed together. Ruth felt the electricity at the contact and knew that Jordan was experiencing the same by the way her expression froze.

Jordan blushed and drifted away before she spoke. "Race you to the falls and back."

With that, they were off. The rest of the afternoon was spent playing in the water and basking in the sun without a repeat of the incident in the water, but Ruth couldn't get the moment out of her mind. It gave her a warm glow just to be around Jordan.

They returned to the cabin late in the afternoon and Jordan made a simple dinner of tortellini and garlic bread while Ruth sliced vegetables for a salad. A nice light wine completed the meal and they sat next to each other in the small dining area. Their arms brushed from time to time and their knees pressed together. The anticipation was nice and Ruth wasn't inclined to rush into something physical.

After dinner, Jordan asked what Ruth wanted to do to pass the time. A couple of sordid suggestions were on the tip of her tongue. "I don't really want to watch a movie. I didn't sleep very well last night and I'm afraid I'd be out in an instant."

"Why didn't you sleep?"

"Probably just because it's a new environment." Ruth shrugged. "I did have a bit of a scare and it got me thinking."

"What happened?" Jordan asked as they sat down on the sofa.

"Nothing spectacular. I had a bad dream and woke up. There was a noise at the window and I instantly thought someone was after me. It turned out to be just the wind."

"You said it started you thinking."

Ruth didn't answer right away and was pleased that Jordan didn't push. Instead, Jordan pulled a chessboard from a drawer on the coffee table. A raised eyebrow was inquiry enough.

"Sure, I haven't played in years," Ruth admitted before continuing with her story. "I was thinking about what happened on my way out here. I'm convinced now that it was just a case of road rage. It's like seeing the old man in the cemetery and hearing the noise at the window last night. I'm starting to think that it's all unrelated. Each time, it's turned out to be nothing. At least nothing that relates back to last year."

"Are you including what happened with Nurse Flanagan in your list?"

Ruth gave the question careful consideration. "I hadn't really thought about that, but I'm sure that Mark Fuller had nothing to do with what's happened to me. I do believe he has something to do with the missing narcotics."

"And Karl's killer?" Jordan placed the chessboard on the coffee table and set up the pieces.

"Long gone. I think I was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm no threat. After all this time, it wouldn't make sense to risk exposing his identity by coming after me now. Not only that, but I still have no real memory of what happened. All I know is what the police were able to piece together from the scene and what the ranger saw when he rushed to help me."

Jordan scooted back against the sofa cushions and took her hand. "I'm glad to hear it. I feel a lot better knowing you're safe."

"I just hope that you're able to figure out what happened at the hospital."

"It'll work out," Jordan assured her. "Now, I believe it's your move."

They played for a while, each winning a game and were well into their third. Ruth was studying the board, considering her next move when she noticed Jordan's hand jerk. She looked up and saw Jordan's eyes closing.

"Am I boring you?"

Jordan jumped a little, looking guilty. "No, of course not. Why would you think that?"

"The fact that you're falling asleep."

"I'm sorry. It's just been a long day."

"Don't you just hate it when your muscles do that?"

“It is kind of a dead giveaway,” Jordan admitted.

Ruth grinned and decided to take advantage of Jordan’s knowledge. “You’re the doctor, why do your muscles jump like that when you’re falling asleep?”

“It’s called a myoclonic jerk. It can be a symptom or a disease.”

“A symptom of what?” Ruth asked worriedly.

Jordan laughed. “A symptom of being exhausted.”

Ruth grabbed a pillow from the end of the sofa and swatted her with it. “Oh you! That was evil.”

“Really though,” Jordan continued, “it’s usually nothing. It happens when you’re falling asleep. There’s a sudden drop in the pulse that makes the brain think the body is dying. In response, it sends out an electric impulse that causes the spasm. Basically, your body is falling asleep faster than your brain can keep up with.”

Ruth wasn’t sure how to respond, but apparently Jordan took her silence the wrong way.

“Judging by how your eyes just glazed over, I can tell you’re riveted by that information. What it boils down to is that it’s time for bed.”

“Ah, do we have to?” Ruth teased.

“Doctor’s orders.”

Ruth knew it was a good idea and gave up the argument. “All right, but on two conditions.”

“What is it?”

“One, that you walk me to my room.” Jordan assented immediately and Ruth laid out the rest of her terms. “Two, you wake me in the morning and let me take you to the ferry.”

“I’d like that.” Jordan took her hand. “But, it will be very early. I could just take a water taxi.”

“I insist.”

“All right.” Jordan’s eyes were shining softly and Ruth had a hard time looking away. “Now, let me walk you to your room.”

They held hands as they climbed the stairs and were soon standing in front of Ruth’s room. For a moment, they stood there just staring into each other’s eyes. Ruth thought for sure that Jordan would kiss her.

“Well, goodnight.”

She started to turn slowly away, but Ruth tightened her hold on Jordan’s hand. Then before she could tell who had made the first move, she felt Jordan’s lips pressing against her own. Ruth groaned and opened her mouth, deepening the kiss and allowing Jordan’s invading tongue to dance with her own. One kiss became too many to count until Ruth had to pull breathlessly away and cling to Jordan.

They held each other for a few moments, catching their breath. Finally, Ruth took a step back. Fire was raging in her and she saw the flame reflected back at her in Jordan’s eyes. It would be so easy to allow this to escalate, but Ruth didn’t want to be selfish. Jordan had to work early the next morning and she needed her rest.

“Goodnight.”

Ruth released Jordan and allowed her to walk away. Jordan stopped at the entrance to her own door and sent her a smoldering look before disappearing inside. Ruth leaned weakly against the doorframe.

“How am I supposed to sleep now?”

Ruth allowed her head to fall forward and thump lightly against the doorway. She rested there briefly before she pushed away and entered the bedroom.

“Time for a cold shower.”

DOWN THE HALL, another shower ran with frigid temperatures. Jordan’s teeth chattered when she finally emerged and reached for a towel. She threw on a short cotton robe to ward off the chill before preparing to brush her teeth. A quick glance in the mirror revealed slightly blue lips and she laughed quietly at her reflection.

Jordan finished in the bathroom and set the clock before she turned out the lights and climbed naked into bed. Unfortunately, sleep proved elusive. She watched the glowing numerals tick by. Somewhere close to midnight, she couldn’t take it anymore. Jordan threw back the covers and got out of bed, pulling on a robe. She just had to see Ruth for another moment before she could sleep. The kiss had her body singing even after the cold shower and she couldn’t get it off her mind. Maybe listening to Ruth’s rhythmic breathing would help her relax.

The guestroom door was open and Jordan leaned against the frame.

She stared at the unmoving lump beneath the covers, illuminated only by moonlight that streamed in through the windowpanes. She strained to hear Ruth’s breathing. She couldn’t really see any details in the dark, but she became convinced that Ruth wasn’t asleep.

Ruth confirmed her suspicions when she sat up and spoke. “Jordan?”

Jordan didn’t wait for an actual invitation. She crossed the room toward Ruth, untying the robe as she went. Ruth anticipated her by throwing back the covers. Eager hands reached for her, pushing the robe from her shoulders. Lips met, teeth skidding together before their mouths opened and they devoured each other.

Jordan lay atop Ruth, the robe open so that naked flesh pressed together. Ruth wasn’t clothed beneath the sheets and Jordan reached down to stroke her fingers across the planes of the flat stomach.

Ruth gasped, running both hands up the smooth plane of Jordan’s back and burying her fingers in the thick mane. She pressed closer and Jordan felt hard nipples and full breasts pushing up against her. She pulled away slightly to gaze down into Ruth’s eyes.

“You are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

She leaned down and captured Ruth’s soft lips with her own, slipping easily into her mouth. Her legs parted slightly and Ruth pressed the slight opening with her knee. Jordan gave way willingly and Ruth’s thigh pressed against her, causing them to both gasp at the desire coursing through their veins.

A hand moved down Jordan’s body, sliding against the warm wet place against her leg. Her fingers slid slickly through the crisp curls and Jordan pressed down harder.

“Inside?” Ruth asked softly.

Jordan could only grunt and move against the teasing fingers. Ruth obliged by sliding easily inside her with two fingers. Jordan felt Ruth anchor her with an arm around her waist, but she was long past speaking. She gasped at the sensation of Ruth filling her so completely. Her exquisite pressure broke and waves of sensation rocked Jordan’s body.

As the tension in her body slowly eased, Jordan collapsed atop Ruth, unable to move. When she could finally breathe again, Jordan sat up and looked at Ruth.

“Your turn.”

Her lips found Ruth’s smaller breast and she sucked as much of it as she could into her mouth. Ruth moaned and her head thrashed against the pillow as Jordan sucked on one breast

while her fingers tugged on the other nipple. Jordan felt Ruth's legs wrap around her waist as she rubbed herself against Jordan's stomach. When she heard Ruth's breathing hitch, she raised up slightly. Jordan didn't intend to let Ruth come like that.

Jordan released the small breast and trailed kisses down Ruth's chest and abdomen, moving ever downward. Jordan settled between Ruth's legs and wrapped her arms around her thighs to hold Ruth in place. Jordan drew her tongue from the bottom of the wet opening up to the hard little knot on top and back again. Ruth gasped and bucked against the sensation and dug her fingers into Jordan's hair. With quick, soft strokes back and forth across the hard, little spot Jordan quickly brought Ruth to a shattering climax.

The sounds of Ruth's cries filled Jordan's heart. As the last waves flowed through Ruth's body, Jordan finally relented. Jordan moved back up and settled onto the mattress with Ruth's head resting against her shoulder. Safe, warm and relaxed, Jordan fell asleep in seconds.

The next morning saw them running late. Jordan had slept in Ruth's room and barely heard her alarm when it went off. They showered together to save time, which resulted in some rather naughty play and setting Jordan back another half-hour. Finally, they were dressed and on their way to Jessup Bay. The ferry was getting ready to set out when they arrived on the docks.

"I'll be back tomorrow for a few days." Jordan said as they raced for the ferry. "Maybe we can get in some deep-sea fishing?"

"I'd love that."

Just as she was about to board the ferry, Jordan stopped and turned back. She kissed Ruth thoroughly in full view of the crowd. Jordan had never been one for public displays of affection, but never considered onlookers as she wrapped her arms around Ruth.

"I'll call you when I get to the hospital."

She jumped onto the ferry and found a spot at the rail. From where she stood, Jordan could see the dock. She watched Ruth walking toward the coffee stand at the far end of the pier. Although it was possible Ruth was merely on her way back to the island, Jordan didn't think so. Ruth had an acknowledged obsession with coffee and wouldn't leave without a cup if she had the chance to obtain one.

A brown coat caught her eye. Jordan fixated on the man they had bumped into yesterday. He sat alone on a bench, rocking back and forth. Jordan thought she saw his lips moving and decided he must be talking to himself. Even sitting hunched, Jordan thought he was a big man. She was happy she and Ruth hadn't become involved in a physical confrontation with him.

RUTH HEADED FOR the Marlin once the ferry departed from view. She decided to sail back to Ghost Island rather than use the engines. It was such a beautiful day that she wanted to immerse herself in the scents of salt and sea, not diesel fuel. While happy with her decision, she felt sore from her previous day's activities and sailing proved more of a chore than she expected. She thought it would be prudent not to push too hard today. Plans modified by necessity, Ruth chose to restrict herself to nothing more strenuous than preparing their gear for tomorrow's fishing trip.

Deep-sea fishing usually ensured a relaxing day of sitting on the dock or in a charter boat and sipping a cold drink unless the fisher actually hooked something. At that point, the excursion could lead to hours of fighting a two-hundred pound monster. Ruth intended to prepare fully for that possibility by resting her body today.

Thoughts of Jordan streaked across her mind and Ruth felt a thrill of arousal. There was more than one reason for her aching muscles. With any luck, there would be many more nights passed so sweetly. Jordan had proved a passionate lover, intensely fierce and yet teasingly gentle. Ruth found the contrast extremely enticing and had the good sense to know she was completely lost.

The proximity of the island brought her back to reality. As she neared the dock, Ruth realized that Jordan had never told her why the island had such an unusual moniker. Perhaps it had something to do with the eerie mist that tended to roll in heavily at dusk and dawn. The first few times Ruth experienced the phenomena, she found it disconcerting.

She crossed the warning markers just as a cloud drifted over the sun. The unexpected shadows made Ruth glance overhead at the gathering storm clouds beginning to roll in. She wondered idly if the rain would increase the fog. Ruth didn't really care. She found the mist somehow calming. The thick air made her feel embraced, isolated and protected. She had the sensation that it screened her from prying eyes. Not that there were many of those aboard the island, she had to concede.

Ruth thought the rain would probably die out overnight. Storms rarely lasted long in California, and it shouldn't delay the planned fishing trip. Lost in quiet contemplation, she pulled into the dock and tied off the boat. Her stomach hadn't awakened yet this morning, but a pot of coffee would be just the thing against the gathering chill induced by the growing shadows.

She had spotted a thermos in one of the cupboards last night. It would be nice to sip at a hot drink while she worked on rods, reels, lures and gaffs.

Ruth's boat shoes left wedges in the sand as she walked across the beach and into the trees. She headed directly toward the cabin a short distance away. She didn't linger inside the cabin, preferring to spend as much time aboard the yacht as she could before the storm broke. As soon as her thermos was full, Ruth headed back to the beach. She stopped long enough to borrow Jordan's straw hat, jamming it down on her head to keep the sun from her too-white skin.

The trees seemed quieter than they had a few minutes ago. Birds had ceased to sing and she thought it likely they were busy finding a roost before the rain started. Unconcerned, Ruth grabbed at the hat as a gust of wind sailed past. She settled onto the Marlin's deck in the partial shade and opened the thermos.

Ruth opened one of the storage cabinets and pulled out the gear. A particularly strong-looking rod assembly caught her eye. Ruth liked the black and yellow colors so she settled to work on that piece first. She wasn't sure how degraded or worn the fishing line was on the reel so she took the mechanism apart. Ruth discarded the now-tangled mass and wound fresh line onto the reel. She repeated the process for three more fishing poles. With that self-assigned task complete, Ruth wiped down the rods and started in on the gaffs. Rust had started to form on the tips, spurred along by the salt water. She lost all track of time until her cell phone rang. Ruth hesitated to interrupt her work until she recognized Jordan's number on the caller display.

"Hello?"

"Hi," Jordan responded quickly. She sounded quite happy. "I hope I'm not disturbing you. I just wanted to hear your voice."

"Are you kidding? I'm delighted that you called. I missed you." Ruth realized how much she had unintentionally disclosed. Fortunately, Jordan either didn't notice or simply choose not to comment.

"What are you doing to pass the time?"

“Soaking up the sun and getting our equipment ready for tomorrow.” She hoped Jordan was as eager for the trip as she was. “What’s going on there? Did anything exciting happen since yesterday?”

“As a matter of fact, you’re not going to believe my news. Ozzie Blaine, that’s the security chief for the hospital, told me that Doctor Fuller was arrested.”

Ruth felt stunned by the news. She didn’t really care for Mark, but that didn’t mean he was a bad guy. “Really, what for?”

“After I left yesterday, Ozzie looked back through the security tapes. Of course, we had already seen someone breaking into the drug cabinets, but couldn’t see who it was. Ozzie reported the incident to the police, turned over the tapes and told them our suspicions. They printed the cabinets and found prints, Doctor Fuller’s.”

“But Jordan, he works there. Wouldn’t his prints be all over the hospital?”

“Yes, but after the cleaning crew left last night no one else entered the room. Ozzie said the crew wiped down everything including those locked containers. The police found only one set of fingerprints. You can guess who they belonged to.”

“I’ll admit, it’s not hard to follow the trail,” Ruth allowed. “Whoever’s prints were on the cabinet is the only possible suspect.”

“I guess he didn’t think about that.”

“What about the drugs in Nurse Flanagan’s locker? She’s still going to have to explain that to the review board.”

“Nope,” Jordan said, slightly breathless in her excitement. “The police found Fuller’s prints there, too, and he has no reason to tamper with personal lockers. Anyway, Ozzie said that he has a friend on the force. That person told him that with the prints, they had enough probable cause for a search warrant.”

“They actually searched his house? What did they find?”

“A truckload of drugs, apparently in the house and his car. They also found a couple of packed suitcases. It looks like Doctor Fuller had planned to take a long trip. Needless to say, with all the evidence piling up against him, Fuller confessed to everything including setting up Trisha Flanagan to take the fall.”

Ruth felt conflicted by the news. On one front, she was relieved for Trisha, but she was disappointed to discover that Mark was a criminal. All her plans for the Karl Stein Foundation had just flown out the window. “Is there any word on when Nurse Flanagan will be reinstated?”

“She already has. Trisha popped her head in here a few minutes ago to say hi. She’s back on the job. Apparently, the review board delivered the news as soon as they found out about Fuller.”

“They were probably afraid she’d sue,” Ruth teased.

“Maybe. Anyway, it was a perfect way to start the day. I’m relieved that this dreadful mess has finally been resolved.”

“That is wonderful news. It just proves how dead on your instincts really are.”

“Yes, well, I don’t like to brag,” Jordan teased. “Still, I feel like things couldn’t possibly get any better.”

“I disagree. I seem to remember things being pretty amazing last night.”

For a moment, Jordan didn’t respond. Ruth wondered if she had gone too far with her flirtatious banter.

“I’ve had difficulty thinking about anything else,” Jordan finally said. “I can’t wait until tomorrow. More precisely, I can’t wait until after the fishing trip.”

Ruth started to come back with another saucy remark when she heard a commotion from Jordan's end. It sounded like an argument had broken out. She worried until Jordan came back on the line.

"I'm sorry, Ruth, but I have to go. One of my patients is strenuously insisting that he is ready for discharge. I'm afraid I don't agree with his diagnosis."

"Sound like any other patients you've had in the recent past?"

"Yes, but this one can at least be reasoned with."

"Hey!" Ruth and Jordan shared a pleasant laugh before Ruth finally relented. "All right, I'll let you go. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow."

"I just wish it could be sooner."

Jordan's parting words warmed Ruth's heart. She returned to her work, preoccupied with the business side of their conversation. Ruth thought about Mark's arrest. She had to admit to feeling anxious and disappointed. That reaction stemmed from the fact that Mark was a doctor and had a duty to help people. Instead, he'd helped himself by confiscating all the narcotics he could get his hands on. The cause of her anxiety proved harder to pin down. Finally, she had to conclude that her feelings had to do with Karl and again she concluded that the foundation in his honor would never be.

Suddenly she wondered, why. Surely, Ruth could see to it that something was set up in Karl's name. She didn't need Mark for that. With Karl on her mind, Ruth's thoughts wandered again to that day on the cliff. Her vision misted with unshed tears over the loss of her friend.

Usually when she thought of that day, Ruth felt fear for what had occurred on the cliff and sorrow at Karl's death. This time, she experienced fury, white and hot singing through her veins. Karl's killer was never caught and there were so many unanswered questions. Why Karl? What could he have possibly done to enrage someone enough to kill him?

Ruth didn't believe in a random convergence of events. There was no way they just happened to be on a cliff while a madman roamed the area looking for a convenient target. No way could she entertain the idea that someone got a thrill from pushing a complete stranger into thin air. Someone had deliberately followed them to the spot. They had planned to kill Karl and attempted to take Ruth out of the picture as well. She didn't know why, but no one had tried to hurt her since.

As much as she longed to regain the memories lost from a head injury during the fall, Ruth realized it was probably for the better. With her mind a void concerning those events, she wasn't a threat to the killer. Ruth was better off if she never remembered. Now, she had to move on with her life. She could take the first step by seeing where things were headed with Jordan and honoring Karl's memory. She would set up the trust herself and get on with the business of living instead of focusing on death and loss. Having Jordan there was a clear incentive.

Ruth's stomach rumbled, reminding her of a missed lunch. Fat, heavy raindrops added to the moment and convinced her it was time to go. Ruth stowed the gear and locked down the storage compartment. It was only early evening, but the clouds made it seem much later. Her sole diet of coffee left her feeling slightly nauseated and Ruth decided it was time for something more solid.

After a quick shower to rinse away old fish goo, Ruth headed for the kitchen. She enjoyed a quiet dinner of leftover pasta and even managed to cook some frozen garlic bread she discovered in the freezer. Ruth savored the crusty bread, noting that she hadn't burned the edges too badly. Wine with the dinner helped her to relax.

Ruth finished her meal and cleaned up before curling up with the novel in Jordan's easy chair. A fire raged in the hearth. The setting was nearly perfect. As dusk began to gather, the

storm broke with gusto. With it came an unexpected high wind that startled Ruth enough to set the book on her knee. She glanced around the room, listening to the wind as it rattled windows in their casings. She noticed movement from the corner of her eye and glanced sharply to the left. A large mirror hung on the wall opposite a window. Ruth could have sworn that she saw something move other than natural things blown about by the wind.

She placed the book on the corner table. The wind abated slightly as she stood and walked around the room. She nervously checked all of the windows, but couldn't see anything except windblown trees and gathering gloom. Her thigh throbbed from the sudden barometric change, but she gritted her teeth and climbed the stairs to the second floor.

Ruth hoped she could get a better view of the area around the cabin from the second floor. She looked out the office window and saw a large man in a dark, saturated coat. He stood near the edge of the woods, looking around as though confused. Ruth thought he must be one of the island residents. Very likely, he had lost power or something and needed help. As she watched, rain pummeled him. His hair plastered to his skull as the wind whipped his jacket about. Ruth couldn't imagine why anyone would be out in this storm unless it was an emergency.

Suddenly, he looked up and their eyes made contact. Ruth felt as if she'd just grabbed onto a live electrical wire when she recognized the crazy man from the ferry. His face hardened into a mask of anger and determination as he started for the cabin. From his stalking pace and clenched fists, Ruth had no doubts about his less than innocent intentions. Her instincts screamed that this was the mysterious killer from the cliff. If she didn't move right now, he would succeed in finishing what he started a few months before.

Ruth frantically reached for the phone on the desk. Her intentions to dial 911 died away before her hand ever made contact with the handset. Even if she could call the police, they would never reach the island in time. She was wasting precious moments by even making the attempt.

All of the doors and windows were locked, but Ruth knew they were only a momentary deterrent. If the intruder wanted in, he would simply smash a window or break down the door. She needed a weapon, but Jordan didn't own a firearm. The best Ruth could do was her cane. She thought of the fireplace poker or a knife from the kitchen, but all of those tools were downstairs.

Ruth spun around and hustled down the stairs as quickly as she could. She grabbed her cane from beside the front door, but didn't know what to do next. A glass shattered in the laundry room to the left, making Ruth's decision for her. She sprinted into the living room where she'd been reading and plucked her cell phone from the end table. The poker was beside the fireplace, too far away. She ran into the kitchen. Ruth grabbed a large chopping knife from the butcher block.

"Where are you, Ruth? You might as well give up now and I'll make it quick. Let's just get this over with."

Ruth cowered against the cabinetry, her eyes widened with fear and shock at the familiar voice. Her mind must be playing tricks on her. It couldn't be him. Overwhelmed with fear and nausea, Ruth sank to the floor. Her back rested against the pantry door. What possible motive could a trusted friend and employee have for any of this? Worse, she never had any clue Henry was capable of such a thing. Ruth couldn't fathom what possible motive he would have to kill her. More than that, why hadn't he made a move before now?

An occasional bang helped her identify Henry moving around the cabin as he searched for her. The kitchen was small, but not easily viewed unless someone stepped inside of it completely. Ruth hoped he would just glance into the room over the top of the counter area and

not see her in the corner. She really didn't want to leave the house and run out into the storm. Unfortunately, the alternative was death or the need to take someone's life.

Something fell over and broke in the bathroom. Ruth remembered her cell phone, but couldn't think of anyone to call that could help her. Then she thought of Jordan. She needed to hear her voice once more, even if only to say goodbye. She dialed the number and waited desperately for Jordan to answer. The phone rang four times and Ruth expected the call to go to voicemail.

"Hello?"

Ruth worried about responding, concerned that Henry would hear her speak. She could hear him moving closer. Ruth finally broke down and shouted into the phone when Henry strolled into the kitchen.

"Help, Jordan, he's going to kill me!"

Chapter Eight

STORM CLOUDS HAD started to gather as Ruth walked away from the beach. Henry heard her leave and popped up from the hold. He carefully raised only his head, comfortable that the gunwale would block him from sight. Bits of food and dirt spotted the dingy brown coat. It hung limply from his large frame. He had climbed aboard while Ruth purchased a cup of coffee at the ferry.

Henry had already tested his disguise, deliberately bumping into Ruth and Jordan to see if they would recognize him. He hadn't expected the physician to react. She'd never seen him except from a distance. When she had, he was dressed in his chauffeur's uniform and respectfully holding the car door for his employer. As for Ruth, she never realized the identity of the homeless man on the pier. With Ruth alone on the vessel, Henry safely stowed away below deck.

He glanced at the sky, pleased with the storm rolling in. The smell of ozone thickened the air. The rain hadn't started in earnest yet, but if the storm did worsen, it would provide the cover he needed. Henry climbed out of the hold slowly, keeping Ruth in his sights until she disappeared into the trees. He followed from a distance, arriving at the cabin seconds after she vanished inside.

Henry found a concealed spot and waited patiently until she reemerged. For the rest of the day, Henry watched her from a distance. He listened to the conversation between her and Jordan, disapproving of their unnatural relationship. After several hours of watching her clean fishing gear, he retreated toward the cabin. Henry felt sure that now would be the perfect time to find something to eat. With Ruth occupied on the boat, she would never know he'd been in and out of the house.

This wasn't the first time Henry had been inside the cabin. As he had before, Henry made a sandwich. He carefully cleaned up the mess, ensuring everything went back into the right place. Then he walked through the house, re-familiarizing himself with the layout of the premises.

He coasted to a stop in front of the master bedroom window, staring out at the bay to where Ruth sat on the boat. Since driving up the coast three days ago, he found his thoughts wandered freely, almost beyond his control. He wasn't able to concentrate on anything for more than five minutes at a time. His mind jumped from subject to subject like a room full of cats jumping across the furniture.

Henry realized he didn't want to do this. The wandering attention was simply a symptom of his resistance. In a way, Ruth felt like his daughter. He remembered her as a child, running through the manor and his heart softened. Tears burned in his eyes and he blinked them away, cursing himself for a fool. He had no choice in this. If he didn't kill Ruth by next weekend, his would be the next funeral. This was the price required to finalize his debt and the mob wasn't very forgiving.

"I should have done her last night."

The thought of looking into her eyes while he did the deed did not appeal to Henry. He acknowledged his reluctance as an act of cowardice. Still, tonight he would get things over with

during the storm. The wind and rain would keep the island's other residents indoors and no one would hear her if she screamed. Henry remained determined to make her death seem like an accident. He had to be very careful. The last thing he needed was the cops showing up to hassle him.

Henry left the cabin so he could keep an eye on Ruth. He cowered in the brush when she returned to the house. Hours passed and slowly, the storm gathered as darkness fell. The wind rose steadily until it whipped branches back and forth, lashing the cabin's windowpanes. Rain started haltingly and then fell in earnest. He didn't mind getting a little wet, but this was too much. Henry left the tree line, looking around for somewhere to take shelter. He remembered the small tool shed not far from the cabin, but movement caught his eye before he could get to the shelter. A light came on in the cabin's second floor and he looked upward toward the window.

Anger surged through his veins when he made eye contact with Ruth. In an instant, she had completely ruined his plans. Henry had wanted to grant Ruth the gift of a quiet, painless death. She wouldn't be ignorant enough to believe his presence on the island was coincidence. Henry felt backed into a corner and didn't react well to the change in plan. The "accidental" death was no longer possible.

Henry headed for the cabin. Now that it was time, he wanted this over with quickly. At least he could get out of this damned weather. A convenient downstairs window, easily smashed, led directly into the laundry room. Henry winced as the skin of his knuckles gave way beneath the glass. He shook off the pain and entered the cabin, his senses on high alert. One thing about this assignment was that Henry knew his quarry.

Fancy thinking considering he hadn't ever killed anyone in his life. Henry had seen lots of movies, though. Ruth was a smart girl and he could expect her to find a weapon of some kind. If he wasn't careful, Henry would become the prey. His boots were heavy with rainwater and mud, but he tried to step quietly as he traveled into the entryway. There was nothing he could do about the trail he left. Henry had last seen Ruth through an upstairs window. He had to assume she was still on the second floor and needed to clear that level first.

Quick and thorough, he cleared every room upstairs including the three small closets. Henry didn't think she would run out in the rain, though that would probably be the smartest thing to do. Ruth Gallagher was a pampered woman, accustomed to people waiting on her and bringing her everything she needed. She had undoubtedly already called the cops, but she would be dead before they arrived.

Henry frowned, disgruntled but determined to finish this and vanish. He descended into the main floor and lunged through the bathroom doorway, moving fast. If Ruth was hiding behind the door, he didn't want to give her a chance to bash him on the head as he entered. His coat sleeve caught on something and he cringed as a vase crashed to the floor. It shattered on the ceramic tile.

Ruth wasn't in the bathroom. He moved into the living room, scanning with the aid of light cast by the fire. Nothing. Henry's body remained still, but his eyes swiveled to the one remaining place where Ruth could hide. Process of elimination told him she was in the kitchen. It was possible she had crouched down in the pantry.

Henry called out to her, inviting Ruth to give up. He didn't expect her to do so, but hoped to scare her into carelessness. He wasn't looking forward to this next step, but at least it was almost over. That thought made him smile.

Boldly, Henry stepped around the eating area and into the long, narrow room. Lightning streaked outside the window, illuminating Ruth where she crouched against the cabinetry. He

heard her scream into the phone, begging her lover for help. Ruth looked up at him with fear shining in her dark eyes. Sympathy warred with determination as he looked down at her. He saw the terror that belonged solely to women in the presence of someone intent on their death.

Ruth seemed weak and helpless, kneeling with a butcher knife in one hand and a cellular phone in the other. He saw the knife tremble in her clenched hand. No doubt, help was already on the way and Henry was aware of time running out. Apparently, Ruth had the same thought.

“Henry, I don’t know why you’re doing this but you should leave. Jordan has probably already called the police.”

“Well of course she did. I know that.” Henry felt pleased with his calm response. His heart pounded, but he wouldn’t show any hesitation.

“Are you going to kill me?”

Her voice sounded small and again there was that nagging sensation. “Yes, I am. I don’t want to, but I have to. It’s you or me and trust me, Ruth, it isn’t going to be me.”

“Why, what did I ever do to you? What did Karl ever do to you?”

She was smarter than he thought. Somehow, Ruth had caught on to his connection to her friend’s death on the cliff. Henry considered answering her question, but then decided against it. The information wouldn’t help her anyway. There was no need to drag this out.

Henry stepped toward Ruth, pulling back a fraction just as she swung the knife. He felt the displacement of air as the blade whished by harmlessly. Henry pulled back his fist and punched Ruth between the eyes. He’d put all his weight behind the blow with the intent of knocking her out. Ruth slumped to the floor with her eyes closed. He felt sure he’d succeeded and considered his next move. Now that Ruth was immobilized, he thought about how to kill her.

He could just use the knife. Slit her throat and be done. That idea didn’t appeal to him. It was far too messy and he cringed at the thought of having to feel her skin part under the blade. He could make it look like a suicide attempt, but then remembered that she had already called the doctor. The police already knew there was an intruder. This could still work in his favor.

“It’ll be on the news.” Henry decided to make a statement. The people calling the shots would see the news of Ruth’s death and erase the debt he owed. “Go big or go home.”

Why couldn’t she have just done what he asked? Things could have gone so much easier. While snooping around earlier, Henry had seen a length of rope hanging from a nail inside the shed. It was exactly what he needed. He figured he had about ten more minutes before the police showed up, but it would be long enough. He would hang her from the ceiling rafters in the living room. It was a little extreme, but finding Ruth hanging would scare the hell out of Jordan Pierce. Henry didn’t really know the doctor, but he didn’t approve of their strange relationship.

Henry left by way of the back porch, the closest access to the shed. He wouldn’t be gone but a second. Windswept rain pummeled him in the face. Henry blinked and pushed out into the storm. He found the rope hanging right where he’d seen it before and turned back toward the cabin, leaving the shed door open.

He turned around just in time to see Ruth disappear around the corner of the cabin. She had regained consciousness and done the last thing he expected. She had raced out into the thunderstorm. If he lost sight of her now, he would lose her in the weather. Panic made his heart race even faster and he shouted out for her to stop. The wind caught and tossed his voice, rendering it likely that she’d never heard him. When he’d thought her unconscious, Henry felt he had time to carry out his plan. With her awake, there was the chance she could evade him until help arrived.

She staggered slightly as she disappeared into the shadows. Clearly, the blow he'd dealt had shaken her. Henry rushed to catch her before her mind cleared. He strode into the rain and the night, giving up the idea of making a statement. Now he would just snap her neck. In this weather, she wouldn't go to the pier. It would be stupid to brave the open sea. That narrowed his search considerably. Either she would head to one of the other island cabins or she would go to the cove.

Fortunately, Henry had done his homework. Ruth had not. She had isolated herself while he checked out the neighbors. He knew that two of the cabin owners worked during the week and stayed on the mainland. The final residence was a timeshare, vacant much of the time. They all carefully kept the doors and windows locked against intruders. Short of breaking and entering, that would leave Ruth only one place to go. Henry seriously doubted that she even knew the location of the other cabins. The only real threat was that she might circle back. Instinctively, he sprinted for the cove.

Sure on his feet and accustomed to the island's layout even in the dark Henry soon glimpsed the back of Ruth's rain soaked shirt as she scrambled through the trees. Her limp seemed pronounced. He assumed that was part of the reason for his ease in catching up to her.

RUTH RAN AS quickly as she could through the driving rain. Hair plastered over her eyes, obscuring her vision even as water streamed like a flood down her face. She was shaking hard from the cold and damp and knew she had to get control of herself. No matter how she tried to suppress the tremors, she just couldn't. Henry was trying to kill her. But why?

Her mind raced furiously as she tried to find the answer, but there wasn't one. Ruth couldn't afford to focus on that question. Right now, it didn't matter. It was far more important to get away from him. She felt driven to reach the cove, convinced that she could find an effective hiding place at the small inlet. She only had to evade his pursuit until the police arrived. Jordan wouldn't be far behind them.

A saturated tree limb smacked her in the face. Ruth pushed through without pause. She couldn't hear Henry in the storm, but he had to have seen her run out of the cabin. Ruth wasn't accustomed to running around the island at night, much less in this kind of weather. Doubts began to assail her. Was the cove this way or had she taken a wrong turn? She wanted to stop and assess her position, but there was simply no time. Ruth realized she had left the cell phone lying on the kitchen floor. At least she'd had the good sense to bring the chopping knife.

Ruth chanced a quick look over her shoulder. She barely caught the flapping motion of Henry's coattail not far away. Her eyes widened in fear and she took off again. Unfortunately, the majority of her attention wasn't on where she planted her feet. Ruth suddenly found herself airborne. A moment later, she hit the ground with a thud. The breath whooshed from her lungs as she struck the bottom of a small ravine. The knife flew off into the darkness. Ruth regretted the loss, pushing to her feet and scrambling up the other side of the small embankment. She couldn't waste time trying to find the knife in such deep shadows with Henry so close.

The storm had drenched the dirt bank, creating a muddy mess. Ruth slipped and scrambled through the sludge until she finally reached the top. She could only hope that Henry fell into the ravine, too. It would give her some space. In fact, she prayed that he broke his leg.

Ruth reached the edge of the pit and lunged to her feet. Breathing hard, she checked behind her and saw Henry calmly stopped at the far side of the wash. He actually smiled at her.

“Where are you going, Ruth? To the cove?”

“Why are you doing this?”

Henry ignored the question. “You’re not going to accomplish anything by running around in this storm. Let’s just get it over with.”

As if. Ruth wasn’t about to give in, but she did want to buy some time until help arrived.

“The least you can do is tell me why. Don’t you at least owe me that?”

“Aren’t you feisty? Then again, you always were. It’s one of the things I’ve always admired about you.”

“Right, I can tell how much you respect me. Since you’re going to kill me anyway, why not just answer the question?”

Henry shook his head, shaking some of the rainwater away. “Sorry, no can do.”

He reached into the coat pocket and drew out a length of rope. Henry grasped the loose end and wrapped it around his free hand. When he snapped the line taut with the other hand, Ruth could guess what he intended to do. He stepped toward the draw and Ruth sprinted away toward the beach. Since he knew about the cove, that was no longer an option. She had no choice but to try for the Marlin. Braving the roiling seas seemed like a better option than going up against a muscle-bound psycho.

Ruth tried to make it look like she was headed back to the cabin to barricade herself inside. All she needed was a couple of minutes’ delay to untie the boat and shove off. Henry would never be able to catch her in the crashing waves. Limping as fast as possible, she crouched and scampered through the trees. Thorns and branches scratched mercilessly at her arms and face. Ruth glanced repeatedly over her shoulder, but couldn’t see Henry.

She finally arrived on the beach liberally covered in muck. Her hands were so slimy that she had to wipe them on her wet jeans before she could release the mooring ropes. She jumped aboard the ship without ever catching sight of Henry. For the first time in what felt like hours, Ruth could take a calming breath. She didn’t know how long it had been since she called Jordan, but the police had to be close by now. Shore patrol would probably arrive before them. If she used the motors and headed for Jessup Bay, Ruth could meet them halfway.

Although rain fell in enough volume to make ark builders pause in contemplation, the seas weren’t overly rough. Ruth had to remember that this wasn’t the New England territories. It was the West Coast. The water was choppy but with the onboard equipment she should be able to navigate easily to the mainland.

Ruth turned on the trolling motor and maneuvered through shallow waters until she had enough depth to turn the engines up to full throttle. With every inch of distance between her and the island, Ruth considered Henry’s betrayal. It hurt desperately to know that someone she trusted had tried to kill her. The only comfort Ruth could gain from the knowledge was that she had finally identified Karl’s killer. Henry wouldn’t be able to hide from the authorities for long.

The rain tapered off somewhat and Ruth hoped it would soon stop. She navigated out of the bay, but was only a few miles off shore when the engines sputtered and stalled completely. During her earlier preparations for the fishing trip, she had topped off the fuel tanks. She couldn’t be out of gas.

“What now?”

The boat would be susceptible to the currents without the engines. The current would carry her off course. The chances were high that shore patrol would never see her, even with the lights on and assuming they were looking.

Ruth had a bad feeling about the engine failure. Although she felt sure she'd left Henry behind on Ghost Island, at some point he must have tampered with the ship. It wasn't likely that they just happened to fail at such a critical moment. Jordan clearly kept the craft in top running condition so Henry was the only explanation Ruth could see. She just hoped that whatever he had done, she could repair the damage.

"Not unless my luck changes," Ruth muttered.

She grabbed a flashlight from the main cabin on her way below deck. The engine compartment would be completely dark. It wasn't really a room, Ruth considered. More of a four-by-four foot cabinet. She opened the door but before she could cross the threshold, she heard a furtive sound.

Ruth spun around, but didn't find anything lurking behind her. She shook her head at the jumpiness and tried to calm down as she entered the engine compartment. Just as she knelt down to investigate the damage, a rope dropped down in front of her face. Powerful hands hauled backward and the rope mashed against Ruth's throat. She had inhaled reflexively before the garrote cut off her breath, but she was still pinned against Henry's barrel chest.

Her fingers wrapped around the rope and Ruth attempted to pull it free so she could breathe. At the same, she kicked backward as hard as she could. Her heel connected solidly with Henry's shin. The ship's unpredictable rise and fall against the waves combined with the blow was barely enough to throw Henry off balance. Ruth heard him curse and felt his grip lessen.

It wasn't much, but now there was enough room for her to take advantage. She held onto the rope tightly and rammed her head backward. She felt her skull connect with the bridge of Henry's nose. Henry released her completely and dropped to one knee. Ruth made a beeline topside as soon as he hit the floor. She heard his roar of anger and the pounding footsteps that told her he wasn't far behind.

Ruth scrambled up the steps, but he caught her before she cleared the final riser. A meaty hand wrapped around one ankle, tripping Ruth up and causing her to bruise a knee against the unyielding wood. If she hadn't been fighting for her life, the pain would have proved excruciating.

The unrelenting attack caused Ruth's fear to morph into fury. She flipped onto her back and lashed out with her free foot. She caught Henry squarely on the chin, knocking him back into the hold. Ruth didn't give him time to regroup. She scampered backward far enough to slam and lock the hatch. The tiny cabinet latch was pretty flimsy so Ruth slid the additional bolt into place as well.

Ruth knew that wouldn't hold Henry for long and she wasn't going anywhere without the engines. She ran for the main cabin and the radio, trembling from both the exposure to cold and her own terror. Ruth prayed that the coast guard or marina police were somewhere nearby, already alerted to her situation. She reached for the mic.

"Mayday, mayday," she shouted over the storm. "This is Ruth Gallagher. I'm on the sailing yacht Marlin approximately three miles east of Ghost Island. I'm headed for Jessup Bay. I have a man that is trying to kill me locked in the hold."

Chapter Nine

JORDAN PUSHED THE accelerator to the floor, racing to Ruth's side as fast as she could. She'd been frantic since the call, dialing 911 while driving at dangerous speeds. Jordan was close to New Rollins, having left work before scheduled in an attempt to surprise Ruth and get an early start on their weekend.

"911 emergency, can you hold?"

"What? No, I can't hold or I wouldn't have called 911," Jordan shot back in frustration. Unfortunately, the question had been rhetorical and the operator had already disappeared.

Jordan growled, but continued to press the phone to her ear. In less than a minute, the operator was back. Jordan quickly outlined the situation. She was already nearing the ferry landing and promised to meet the marina police at the dock. Jordan would have to show the police exactly where to find her cabin.

Two officers were already standing by when Jordan reached the pier. One man stood at the helm while another cast off the mooring lines. Jordan didn't wait for an invitation. She barely remembered to lock her car before sprinting across the lot and jumping into the boat.

The officer who had untied the ropes spoke first. "I'm sorry, ma'am, we're on our way to a call."

"Yeah, I know. I'm the one who called it in." He frowned but Jordan preempted any attempts to throw her off the ship. "I'm assuming you are responding to an attack on Ghost Island?"

"Yes, but—"

"You need me. The call came from my cabin and you'll waste time looking for it when I can lead you straight there."

He exchanged a glance with his partner, but received only a shrug in reply. "Fine, but stay out of the way. Let's go, Roberts."

Officer Roberts pushed the throttle forward and Jordan had to grab on to a rope cleat to keep from falling over the side. Wind whistled down her shirt, causing a cascade of goose bumps. She gritted her teeth against the chill, but kept her eyes on the horizon. Officer Roberts quickly cut across the distance to Jessup Bay and kept going. They were going so fast that the boat seemed to skip across the water. Jordan's worry made it difficult to draw breath as she scanned frantically across the horizon.

Approximately halfway to the island, Jordan heard a frantic call for help come across the police radio. She recognized Ruth's terrified voice. Jordan inhaled sharply, realizing that Ruth had been forced to leave the island.

"That's her. How far away are we?"

The officer Jordan had argued with shook his head at the question before he answered the call. "This is Officer Pete Lawrence with the marina patrol unit. We are approximately four minutes away. What is your status?"

"My status is that someone is trying to kill me."

"Do you recognize your attacker?"

“Yes, it’s Henry Silas. He’s my driver.”

The sound of splintering wood that came across the connection interrupted any reply Lawrence might have made. Jordan thought they should be right on top of the Marlin. She looked all around, straining for any signs of the boat. In the premature darkness created by the storm, she expected to see the running lights.

“There,” the pilot yelled, pointing toward his left.

Jordan checked the direction Officer Roberts indicated, but didn’t see anything at first. Finally, she spotted the dim lights through the rain. The storm had started to taper off, but Jordan was drenched. Her hair hung limply in front of her eyes. She pushed the saturated locks aside.

“That has to be them. No one else would be desperate enough to be out in this weather.”

RUTH HEARD THE crash caused by Henry breaking through the hatch. Apparently, he had found something to use as a battering ram. She turned toward the sound just in time to see the bolt break off. A second blow and the door flew open completely. Henry pushed the panel back on battered hinges and stepped calmly onto the deck. He held a scuba tank by the neck.

“Time’s up.” He tossed the tank aside, ignoring it as it careened across the slippery planks.

Henry stalked into the cabin with her, storm water coursing down his frame and soaking into the carpeting. Murderous intent reflected in his steely eyes and Ruth backed away. She slid around a bolted down table in an attempt to evade him. Now that she knew the police were so close, Ruth only had to stay alive for a few more minutes. Unfortunately, she didn’t think that was going to be as easy as it sounded.

“You don’t really think that’s going to work, do you?”

“You don’t really think I’m just going to give in, do you?”

Ruth didn’t wait for a response. As soon as Henry came partway around the table, she bolted aft. Henry reached out with one long arm and Ruth felt his fingertips snag in her blouse. The grab was enough to pull her sideways and allowed Henry to secure his hold. Ruth struggled against him, beating at Henry’s chest as he pushed her to the floor.

She felt Henry’s feet on either side of her hips as his large hands wrapped around her throat. Ruth tried desperately to draw breath, but he only squeezed harder. Ruth could hear the thundering of blood in her ears and nothing else. In seconds, darkness quickly closed in. She tried to pry his fingers loose to no avail. Suddenly, unaccountably, Henry released her.

Ruth heard his muffled curse. He grabbed her collar with one hand and dragged her toward the hold. She felt like a child in his grip, unable to resist and easily towed along. When he pulled her down the steps, Ruth landed uncomfortably on each riser. She felt the bruises forming and hoped she’d be alive later to complain about the pain. In the meantime, she found it difficult enough to take a breath. Her throat ached and Ruth coughed and gagged though she continued to try to resist. Her vision swam and then cleared as air returned to her starved lungs.

Henry pushed Ruth into the corner of the hold and squatted on top of her with one knee. He placed a meaty palm across her mouth to keep her quiet before he reached toward something she couldn’t see. When he pulled his other hand into view, Ruth saw that he held the fishing gaff. The gaff was used for hooking large fish and hauling them aboard ship. Ruth expected Henry to use the tool on her.

“You’re girlfriend is here. Stay nice and quiet or I’ll gut her like a fish.”

Ruth didn't doubt his threat for a second. She was mystified how Jordan had reached her so quickly, but wasn't about to put her in danger. Ruth met his eyes and thought she saw regret. It wasn't the first time since the whole ordeal began that she had witnessed such an expression. She had seen his indecision when he came at her in Jordan's kitchen. Clearly, Henry regretted his actions, but apparently not enough to stop.

"By the way, I didn't hurt your friend. That was someone else. For what it's worth, I just wanted you to know that."

Henry removed his hand from Ruth's mouth. Before she could cry out and attempt to speak, he punched her on the left temple. Ruth's vision darkened again and she slumped to the floor. She didn't lose consciousness. The blow was just enough to scramble her thoughts. Snatches of images resembling a movie on a reel danced across her eyes. The images were incoherent and jumbled together, not really making sense.

Ruth saw Henry running toward the steps leading topside. She heard him yell, but didn't understand the words. Two or three people appeared at the top of the landing. Their shapes danced together, merging and separating. She flinched at the sharp, loud bark of a handgun, heard Henry grunt in pain and watched him reel backward.

As her sight cleared, Ruth realized the hold was now overly populated. Two police officers struggled with Henry, rolling him onto his stomach. Handcuffs snapped in place around his wrists. Ruth still felt sluggish from the blow to the head. She couldn't seem to look at anything but the spreading pool of blood under her former driver's body. Then gentle arms surrounded her and Ruth looked up into Jordan's worried gaze.

"How badly is he hurt?" The words sounded clear in her head, but Ruth hardly understood her own mumbled question.

"Not bad enough," a police officer responded.

He grabbed Henry around a biceps and assisted him to his feet. Ruth didn't think the officer was very gentle, but then again, she didn't really care. Whether he was sorry for his actions or not, Henry had tried to kill her.

"It's just a flesh wound," Jordan said.

"He tried to kill me." Ruth's head swam and her eyes kept trying to close. Her thoughts were confused. Had she already told Jordan about Henry's perfidy?

"It's all right. He won't ever harm anyone else. Let's get you out of here."

Ruth was treated to a ride on the police patrol boat while Jordan insisted on keeping an eye on the Marlin from the vessel's bridge. She had attached a tow rope to the police vessel and stayed aboard to ensure no additional problems. Jordan had told Ruth she'd get her boat fixed once they arrived at the marina. Officer Lawrence remained with Jordan to keep an eye on Henry. With Ruth injured, the officers chose not to secure him on the same vessel. They handed him off to a waiting sheriff's unit as soon as they reached port. Ruth saw him briefly before the police loaded him into the cruiser. A blood-soaked rag bound Henry's arm, but otherwise he appeared uninjured.

Chapter Ten

FIGURES STUTTERED THROUGH her mind. Karl on the mountaintop, peering down at her from above. The smile disappearing from his lips as an unseen force hauled him from sight. She clung helplessly to her tether, the knowledge of Karl's fate warring with the inability to act. When her would-be executioner began sawing through the line, Ruth had reacted out of an instinct born of desperation.

Ruth fought the dream, realizing even unconscious that she was locked in sleep. She struggled upright, fighting restraints created from hospital tubing. Awake before her eyes opened, Ruth gasped and searched out the shadows for a hidden assailant. She was alone. Although intimately accustomed to medical facilities since the day of terror on the cliff, the room was unfamiliar. For a moment the discontinuity threatened to ratchet her fear up another notch.

When the events of the past few days flooded back, Ruth relaxed against the pillow. The sweat induced from the nightmare began to cool, leaving a clammy feel in its wake. Ruth closed her eyes and concentrated on the beeps and whirs created by the hospital equipment. She felt a little abandoned and tried very hard not to hold Jordan at fault. This wasn't Jordan's hospital and she didn't have run of the facility like she did in Los Angeles. Because the incident with Henry occurred near Jessup Bay, emergency services had carted Ruth to a local medical center. From the quiet, Ruth surmised she had awakened either very late or very early in the morning. Visiting hours were long over and Jordan couldn't use the family member excuse.

She thought about the dreams as her breathing assumed a more natural cadence. Ruth had thought about that day hundreds of times during the last few months. She had strained to recall anything law enforcement could use, but she had never dreamt about it before. Perhaps the fact that Henry tried to kill her caused her subconscious to rehash those frightful details. She could still feel the texture of the nylon rope against her fingertips as she gazed upward. Ruth heard again the thud created as Karl's body hit the ground. She caught sight of a slight figure dressed in desert camo holding some sort of club aloft.

Her eyes snapped open and Ruth rose onto her elbows. She hadn't previously remembered anything about their attacker. Furiously, she tried to recall more but her mind refused to yield the coveted information. All Ruth had was an impression of a slender figure and a flash of camouflage clothing. She couldn't even discern the killer's gender. Despite the limitations of the memory, Ruth realized two things. She'd always assumed the killer was a man, but she didn't really know for sure. Henry had spoken the truth when he said he didn't hurt Karl. The image in Ruth's mind was much too small to have been him. Also, the responsible party had prior knowledge of the climbing trip. They had dressed to blend into the terrain and lain in wait at Karl's planned destination.

Ruth wasn't sure what all of this meant for her longevity. Henry had tried to finish the job yesterday, yet she couldn't understand why. She most assuredly was not a threat to anyone because she hadn't seen anything concrete. Why try to kill her now? Why after all this time?

Dawn broke while she considered current events and the birds started singing. The storm had passed and she saw clear skies outside the windowpanes. Her head throbbed a little from where Henry struck her. She reached up to rub her temple when she remembered the stitches. She sighed and closed her eyes. Ruth had just begun to doze off again when something thumped against the door. A nurse pushed through a second later with a trolley. No matter the quality of care offered or the setting, institutional food always smelled the same. Breakfast. Ruth wrinkled her nose but sat up as straight as she could in the partially reclined mattress.

“Don’t look so enthusiastic.” Ruth didn’t know the older woman, but she sounded friendly as she teased.

“It’s nothing personal. I’m just not a fan of hospital food.”

“This is the part where I’m supposed to remind you that it’s good for you.”

“I’m sensing a but,” Ruth stretched her back, trying not to tangle her I.V. tube in the process.

“But, I completely understand. Unfortunately, the powers that be kind of frown on biscuits and gravy.”

“Would that be your breakfast of choice?”

“Absolutely. Anyway, you need to try and eat something.”

The door unexpectedly opened again and Jordan walked in. She smiled and Ruth felt like the room had brightened a little more. Ever the physician, Jordan added to the nurse’s admonition.

“Yes, you need to eat and get your strength back. Oh, is that Jell-O?”

“It’s all yours.”

Ruth happily handed over the strawberry Jell-O and a plastic spoon. The nurse frowned but didn’t say anything. She left a few seconds later and Jordan plopped down in the bedside chair. Ruth complied with doctor’s orders and picked at her rubbery eggs for a few seconds. She was so excited to have Jordan there and felt a little guilty about her earlier thoughts.

“You do know that you actually have to eat it, right?”

“It smells gross.”

Jordan chuckled and quickly covered her mouth with her hand to keep from spitting Jell-O across the room. “I promise to buy you a steak later.”

“Does that mean I can go home soon?”

“Trust you to cut to the chase. I know you don’t like being in the hospital, believe me, I know. However, you have a concussion and until the doctor here gives you the all-clear, you’re stuck.”

“Not necessarily,” Ruth argued. “I can always get dressed and leave.”

“Against medical advice, sure. You’re not going to do that, are you?”

“No,” Ruth grumbled, stuffing another bite of eggs into her mouth.

“Good.”

Jordan unexpectedly moved closer. Ruth figured out what she was doing and stared back as Jordan checked her pupils. She flinched slightly when Jordan touched her temple, but the brief check-up was already over.

“Your pupils are even. I think the doctor will probably release you this afternoon.”

“That long?”

“Twenty-four hours, my dear. You know the rules.”

“That doesn’t mean I have to like them.”

“Are you finished pushing your food around?”

The question caught Ruth off guard. She still had a headache from the concussion and it took her a moment to respond. When she nodded, Jordan left the chair and moved toward her. Jordan

dropped her empty cup and spoon on the tray and slid the hinged table aside. She settled close on the mattress and Ruth shivered as the heat of their thighs pressed together. Jordan leaned down and Ruth's eyes started to close in anticipation of a kiss. The slight squeak of the door swinging open interrupted the moment. A pair of strangers walked in like they had every right to go wherever they wished.

A tall, curvaceous woman with short blond hair led the way. She wore a tailored pantsuit and sensible black loafers. The man following her also wore a suit, complete with tie and a dark blue peacoat. The word "Fed" screamed in Ruth's head.

"Sorry to barge in," the woman began. Something in her tone belied the platitude. "Ruth Gallagher?"

"Yes, can I help you?"

The woman flashed a gold badge held inside a black leather wallet. Her movements were practiced, so quick that Ruth barely caught a glimpse of the metal shield. "I'm U.S. Marshal Emma Blake. This is my partner, Marshal Lyle Moore. Do you have a moment?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Ruth's remark went unnoticed as Jordan stood. "What's this about?"

Marshal Blake raised an eyebrow at the sharp inquiry. "And you are?" Ruth could have sworn she heard a slight southern drawl.

"Doctor Jordan Pierce."

"Judging from your proximity and the lack of a white coat," Marshal Moore said, "I'd guess you're not the treating physician."

"That's right."

Blake cut to the chase. "We'll need you to wait outside while we take a statement from Ms. Gallagher. That wasn't a request," she added when it seemed Jordan would balk.

Jordan spared Ruth a backward glance and left the room. Ruth didn't miss the way she ground her teeth together, but she did comply. A slightly panicked sensation took up residence in her chest at being left alone with the strangers. She wished Jordan had resisted more.

"I'll repeat Jordan's question. What's this about? Since when do U.S. Marshals become involved in an attempted murder?"

Marshal Blake took charge of the conversation while her partner seemed content to stand guard by the door. "When it's not a single incident. I believe you were involved with an actual murder a few months ago and now this happens. Besides, we have broad law enforcement responsibilities. In this case, we get involved in an attempted murder when the suspect has ties to organized crime and dies under mysterious circumstances."

"Dies? Who died?"

Blake's expression froze. "Hasn't anyone from the local police department spoken with you?"

"Well, yes of course. I gave them my statement yesterday after they took Henry, my former chauffeur, into custody."

The gnawing sensation that resided in her chest seemed to expand, making it difficult to draw breath. Ruth thought she knew what was coming next. At least Marshal Blake's cool, professional attitude thawed somewhat and Ruth spotted a glimmer of compassion.

"I'm sorry to tell you that Mr. Silas was killed last night by another inmate."

"What? How could something like that happen?"

Blake held up a hand. "Let me start at the beginning. Once I'm finished, maybe you can fill in some blanks for me."

Ruth nodded, putting on a brave face while fervently wishing for Jordan even more. She could use some moral support from someone who really cared how she felt.

“As I said, we have evidence that Henry Silas was involved with the Carlotti family. Apparently, he liked the horses and owed Don Carlotti, as they call him, quite a bit of money. When he couldn’t pay up, we suspect that Franco Carlotti ordered him to take you out of the picture as a way to pay off his debt.”

“You can’t be serious. First off, who is Franco Carlotti and how could Henry be involved with him?” Ruth resisted the possibility, unable to come to terms with the idea regardless of what he had tried to do. There should have been signs of such a connection. He’d lived in her home and she interacted with him on a daily basis.

Blake pointedly ignored Ruth’s query about Carlotti. “Oh yes, I’m very serious. There’s no question of Mr. Silas’s involvement with the Carlottis. Frankly, I’m not too sure about you. After all, you were his employer. I’m not sure how you could have missed it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He tried to kill me.”

“I’ll give you that. Did he say anything to you that might have implicated the Carlotti family?”

“No, but he did say that he didn’t kill Karl. I’ve never heard of this Carlotti, but I suppose it’s possible that’s who he was talking about.”

Marshal Blake gestured toward the chair and Ruth nodded, giving tacit permission for the agent to sit. Once settled, Blake attempted to explain. “Franco Carlotti hides behind a legitimate corporation that deals in pharmaceuticals and medical testing equipment. In reality, he is a crime boss operating out of Los Angeles. His family is into everything from numbers and racketeering to drugs and gun running. I highly doubt that Carlotti personally killed your friend. He delegates and doesn’t typically get his hands dirty.”

“Then why do you suspect him?”

“Last year, the police apprehended one of his...associates while attempting to carry out a hit. Carlotti himself ordered that hit. The suspect agreed to turn state’s evidence in exchange for immunity.”

“So he got away with trying to kill someone by offering to testify on his boss. Great, what’s that got to do with me or Karl?”

“One year ago, our witness suffered a major heart attack. Doctor Stein performed a triple bypass and saved his life. Because of that operation, Stein had access to certain information such as the witness’s new identity. It would have been in his patient records. Stein had to sign a nondisclosure agreement before he operated.”

“They killed Karl to keep him quiet? I’m not sure I follow.”

“After the person on the mountain cut your line, they attempted to extract that information from your friend, at least that’s what the forensic evidence indicates. If the Carlottis could find out what alias our witness had assumed, it would go a long way to help them track him down. Should the state’s key witness suddenly die or disappear, we wouldn’t have a case. Carlotti would go free.”

“When you say they attempted to extract information,” Ruth cleared her throat to stop the trembling in her words, “do you mean they tortured him?”

Blake hesitated. “I don’t think that’s something you should dwell on. The good times you had with your friend are more important.”

Although Ruth realized the marshal had a point, she couldn’t put that genie back in the bottle. She would take the information about Karl’s death out and examine it over and over, attempting

to figure out where she could have saved him. The original police investigation had presented the possibility of torture, but their findings were inconclusive. Now she knew for sure. For the moment, however, Ruth had to focus on the situation at hand. She wiped away the single tear that tracked down her cheek.

“What about the guy that tried to run me off the road? Was he in on this? He failed so they sent Henry to follow up?”

Marshal Blake withdrew a notebook from her inside breast pocket. She consulted her notes before answering the question. When she looked up, Ruth searched her eyes for any signs of deception. She found nothing.

Blake shrugged. “His name is Ray Farnsworth, a carpenter. His wife had just filed for divorce and taken him for everything he was worth. Instead of taking his frustration out on her or in the gym, he stole a car from a dealership and attempted to work off his rage by running you off the highway.”

“How did they find him?”

“He turned himself in. The police arrested him for reckless endangerment, assault on a peace officer and felony assault.”

Ruth didn’t really know what to say. “I thought carpenters were supposed to be gentle and patient.”

“Not all carpenters are from Nazareth, honey. Now let’s get down to brass tacks. Did either Karl or Henry give you any information about someone in the witness protection program?”

“No.”

“Can you remember anything about your attacker on the mountain?”

“No. Wait, maybe.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not sure. I was dreaming about that day and saw someone wearing camouflage clothing. They were fighting with Karl.”

Marshal Blake scribbled the details on her little notebook. “Did you get a description, hair color, anything?”

“Just that the person was tall and thin.” Ruth shook her head. “It might not mean anything, just a dream. Now that I’m awake, I certainly don’t recall seeing anyone up there.”

“Great, so we still have nothing.” Blake shoved the book back into her pocket.

She spent another thirty minutes asking questions. Ruth went over every detail of the last few days since her release from the Los Angeles hospital. Marshal Blake wasn’t content with one telling of the story. She stopped Ruth repeatedly, exploring each detail regardless how insignificant it seemed. By the time they finished, Ruth felt like Blake had turned over every rock in her unconscious searching for monsters. Unfortunately, Ruth wasn’t able to contribute anything further.

“At the risk of pointing out the obvious, a second attempt has been made on your life. I don’t think it’s too outrageous to say that the threat isn’t over. Is there any way I can talk you into accepting protective custody?”

The question caught Ruth by surprise. Hadn’t they just determined that she didn’t remember anything of consequence? “No, I’m not about to give up my freedom without a good reason. I didn’t see anything on the mountain and I don’t know anything about your witness, unless you’d care to tell me who this person is?”

“Sorry. I’m sure you’ve heard the old saying ‘need-to-know’? Well you definitely don’t need to know. It’ll be safer for you if you don’t.”

Marshal Blake flashed a smile and Ruth felt a blast of heat in her stomach. The reaction caught her off guard. She shouldn't react to a total stranger this way, especially someone so outrageously condescending. Ruth thought about how she felt for Jordan and willed the attraction away. She was happy to consider that the concussion caused her atypical reaction to Marshal Blake.

"Okay, I'll admit you have a point. I don't need to know anything about your witness, but I still don't want police protection."

Blake waved the statement away. "Fine, you don't want us now but wait until something happens."

Ruth was getting enough of the sarcasm. She didn't know if Blake used it as a shield against things she'd seen on the job, nor did she care. She seemed to view Ruth through the same lens as all the other potential witnesses she'd dealt with in the past. Ruth didn't consider herself part of the ninety-nine percent and found the perspective somewhat annoying. Marshal Blake's attitude irritated her. Ruth had a feeling the marshals were making more of the situation than need be.

"I seriously doubt that will be a problem."

"Be that as it may, give me a call if you think of anything else or if you suspect someone is following you."

Blake offered her a business card. Ruth pinched the end of the paper, trying not to make contact with Marshal Blake's fingers. For some reason, she was acutely aware of her and knew touching Blake would not be a good idea.

"Before we go, I'd like to caution you about trusting anyone."

"What are you talking about?"

Marshal Blake shook her head. "I'm referring to basic precautions. If someone is still after you, try to be aware of your surroundings. Don't go for a walk at night by yourself, vary your routine, that sort of thing."

"All right, I understand."

"Also," Blake hesitated as if she knew Ruth wouldn't like what she said. "Keep everything I've told you confidential. You say you don't know anything and I believe you."

Ruth nodded. "But if I'm careless and mention any of what you've told me, someone else might believe otherwise."

"I hope you're right. Maybe the Carlottis don't have anything to do with this and your chauffeur just went off the deep end. That still doesn't explain why he was killed in his cell last night. Just be careful."

Marshal Blake stood and Ruth sensed that the interview was over. She kept silent as Moore opened the door for his partner and the two left. Jordan entered the room, glancing over her shoulder to watch the pair walk away. A frown of confusion rested between her brows, but it vanished when she looked at Ruth. A smile that melted Ruth's heart replaced the scowl.

"What was that all about?" Jordan plopped down in the chair that Marshal Blake had just vacated.

Ruth opened her mouth to answer, but Blake's warning reverberated in her mind. For a split second, she berated herself for holding back from Jordan. Jordan had saved her life and Ruth trusted her implicitly. Still, there could be a third party listening from outside the ground floor window or outside the door. Ruth hesitated to say anything remotely incriminating in such a public place.

"They just wanted to know what happened yesterday."

"I didn't know marshals had jurisdiction in a local municipality."

Ruth impishly repeated Blake's earlier response. "Apparently, they have wide law enforcement responsibilities."

Jordan smiled and reached out to brush the hair back from Ruth's forehead. Ruth closed her eyes briefly, enjoying the warm touch. Jordan's caress made her feel cherished. She couldn't help compare the sensation to the response generated by Marshal Blake. Instinct said that Emma Blake could be dangerous. A chill traveled down her spine, but Ruth wasn't afraid. In fact, she found Marshal Blake too sexy for her own good.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing," Ruth answered quickly. "Nothing at all. Now tell me why you look upset."

Jordan's eyes widened in pleased surprise. "You know me so well already. Well, you're right. I got a call from Nurse Flanagan while I was in the hall. She said Mark Fuller made bail so he showed up for work today."

"You're kidding me."

"I wish. He almost got Trisha fired for something he did and now he's out of jail and acting like nothing ever happened. It just doesn't seem right."

Ruth squeezed Jordan's hand. "It's not, but keep in mind that he's out on bail. That means he'll still have to go to court over what happened and what about the hospital board? Won't they terminate him now?"

"That's true, I hadn't thought of that. They'll probably can him as soon as they find out he's wandering around the property."

"I'm sure they will. Hey, you didn't happen to see my doctor anywhere while you were lurking in the hall did you?"

"I swear, you're like a broken record. No, but I promise I'll let you know when I do."

Ruth was happy she could lighten the atmosphere as they shared a laugh. She was already feeling better and the headache had dissipated. Ruth felt optimistic that she'd be released before dark.

"I had an idea," Jordan said, breaking into her thoughts. "Why don't we have dinner tonight in the city?"

"Did you have someplace special in mind?"

"Not really, but I do know this great pizza joint. Afterwards, I thought it would be nice if you stayed over with me at my apartment. I do still have a few days off."

Ruth thought of their interrupted weekend and almost said yes to everything. She wanted to spend time alone with Jordan exploring possibilities. Unfortunately, Ruth wasn't feeling up to it and had other responsibilities as well.

"It sounds wonderful, really, but I just can't. I need to pick up my car along with a copy of the police report. I haven't even reported the accident to the insurance company yet."

"Is that the only reason?" Jordan looked deeply upset. Her lower lip trembled and she had trouble meeting Ruth's eyes. "You're not suspicious of me now because of what Henry did? I mean I get it if you are."

"No, God no. Look at me." Ruth tightened her hold on Jordan's hand and waited until she complied. "I don't think you're out to kill me and serve me up to..." She stopped as she realized what she'd almost said. "I trust you, okay? I really do have things to take care of and I think I also need some time alone to process everything."

"You promise?"

"Yes, I promise. Despite all that, I expect you to give me a rain check. I'd love to see your apartment."

Jordan shook their joined hands. “We could always make it an indoor party at your place. Order pizza in.”

She was tempted, but decided on the responsible choice. “I’m sorry, Jordan. I just need to rest.”

“Say no more, I understand completely.”

Ruth thought Jordan had to feel rejected, yet she still spent the next few hours at her side. Jordan made her laugh by telling her stories of problem patients over the years. Her puckish sense of humor made Ruth forget both the setting and the visit from Marshal Blake. Eventually, her treating physician appeared and pronounced her cleared to leave the hospital. It was the news she’d waited for, yet suddenly she felt the impending separation from Jordan.

Jordan must have seen something in her expression. “It’s fine. At least we know there are no lasting repercussions and don’t think I’m giving up so easily. Once you’re rested, we’ll get together.”

“I’ll hold you to that, but can I ask a favor?”

“Sure, anything. You know that.”

Ruth nodded. That was something she was just beginning to understand. It was a relief to know there was one person she could truly trust. “Can you give me a ride to the ferry parking lot? I need to pick up my car.”

Chapter Eleven

RUTH TOOK A moment to rest her eyes as she leaned her head back against the Jaguar's headrest. She'd just finished the drive back to Los Angeles from Jessup Bay. The sun shone so brightly overhead that even her Rayban sunglasses couldn't prevent her headache's return. The light seemed to stab through her eyes and directly into her brain. Closing her eyes for a few seconds eased the pain, but Ruth couldn't sit in the car indefinitely.

Regardless, she continued to sit in the plush leather seat. She knew procrastinating against the inevitable wouldn't change the situation. Henry's absence from the house would be a constant reminder of his duplicity. The funny thing was that the betrayal hurt more than the concussion. Her fear had faded quickly with Henry's apprehension and she hardly remembered the pulse-pounding terror. What Ruth did remember was Henry carrying her on his shoulders when she was a toddler. She could easily envision him dropping her at school throughout the years. The only time he'd been absent was during her college years. Even then, he still lived and worked for her family. Henry was a fixture in her life and she had never truly known him at all.

She remained in the car because going into the house would require full acceptance of his treachery. How had she been so blind? How could she not have seen that he was in trouble? Borrowing money from a loan shark to pay off gambling debts should have left signs for her to notice. As much as it disheartened her, Ruth acknowledged Henry's motivations. What she found more difficult to believe was that the head of an organized crime family had ordered her death. It sounded like something from a Lifetime movie. Had she not lived through the frightening episode, Ruth would never have believed it.

Eventually, Ruth sighed and straightened. She wiped the tears from her cheeks and left the battered car sitting unlocked in the driveway. Considering everything she'd gone through in the last few months, she really didn't care if someone stole the Jaguar. She still needed to call the insurance company to arrange for the adjustor to come out, but it could wait. The most important thing on her to-do list was a hot bath. Ruth desperately needed to get the scent of hospital antiseptic out of her nose and off of her skin.

She climbed the steps and entered the empty house, but didn't really notice any details. The idea that Karl was tortured careened around in her head, taking up all of her attention. Ruth was cognizant enough to turn the deadbolt behind her. Out of reflex, she dropped her bag on the foyer table. She noticed the corner of a business card sticking out of a side pocket and thought about Marshal Blake. The woman seemed competent enough, as well as arrogant, and Ruth hoped she would be able to bring Karl's killer to justice. Beyond that, Ruth felt tapped. She couldn't think about this anymore or she would go mad.

The bath called to her and Ruth promised herself a very large glass of wine afterward. Just as she made that pledge, she remembered the insurance company. Her head dipped and she shook her head. Why did everything always have to be so hard? Fine, she would deal with the insurance people first. She took the police report she'd picked up at the Jessup Bay Police Department out of her purse and headed for the library.

Dealing with the insurance people and arranging a time for an adjuster to come out and look at the car took the last of her reserves. Once all the details were finalized, she took a long soaking bath and drank the coveted wine before heading to bed. Ruth fell asleep easily and enjoyed a deep sleep free of nightmares.

For the next few days, Ruth stayed home. She avoided the telephone and allowed most calls to go to the machine. The only interruption was a brief visit from the claims adjuster. Ruth experienced an almost pathological need to avoid everyone. She wanted to be left alone to the quiet of her familiar home. The only calls she answered were those from Jordan. She called at least twice a day, showing Ruth with her actions how much she cared. Each time the calls ended, Ruth felt guilty about brushing Jordan off. It was natural that she wanted to spend time together and that she wanted to talk about all that had happened. Jordan asked about the Marshals' visit and if they were close to finding out who ordered her death. Ruth wasn't able to answer those questions because Marshal Blake's warning kept her silent.

Ruth knew it was irrational. Jordan had rushed toward Ghost Island with the police in tow and saved her life. Unfortunately, the incident with Henry had Ruth questioning her own instincts. She couldn't be with Jordan until she got over her doubts.

On the evening of the fourth day home, Ruth felt like she was going stir crazy. She hadn't left the sanctity of her house and no one had visited. Ruth had sent all of the domestic staff away with a phone call before her arrival from the hospital. Not even watching television or listening to music could soothe the stifled feeling. The small tremor she'd felt earlier in the day wasn't even enough to liven up her day. She still wasn't ready to speak with anyone, but needed some fresh air.

Ruth glanced out of the living room window, noticing that the sun had just started to set. An outdoor solar lamp winked on and illuminated the front of the property. With a few days of quiet away from Henry's attack, the urgency had faded. Ruth briefly considered Marshal Blake's offer of protection and decided she'd been right to refuse. Whatever the true story for her trusted chauffeur's attack, she seriously doubted it had anything to do with the mob. Henry's motives for trying to kill her had died with him.

Ruth pulled on a sweater to ward off the evening chill and headed out the front door. A short walk to the end of the private road and back should be enough. Houses here were few and far between. Asphalt muffled the sound of her footfalls as she walked. Ruth felt a sudden longing for Jordan's company. She took a deep breath to ease the unexpected ache in her chest and looked away.

Somewhere far in the distance a dog barked. The breeze tossed her hair as the sun started to set. Ruth reached the end of the road and stopped just short of the trees that lined the public roadway. Without another soul in sight, Ruth concentrated on filling her lungs with cool, evening air and listening to the wind in the acacia trees. The heavily foliated trees provided a sense of isolation. Only the occasional vehicle passed at this time of the night. Ruth welcomed the false sense of privacy. She turned back toward the house but remained standing in the open, simply enjoying the quiet. After a few minutes, Ruth started back toward the house. She strolled at a slow pace, savoring the change of scenery from the confines of her home.

While she felt confident that there wasn't a plan in the works to assassinate her, Ruth wasn't an idiot. This was still a big city filled with desperate people and bad things happened when darkness fell. She lived in an isolated area that was generally free of the homeless or someone looking for an easy score, but that was no guarantee of safety. She refused to become the target of a random attack and planned to arrive home before the sun disappeared completely.

Streaks of orange and yellow painted the sky. She glanced away from the brilliant display and caught a hint of movement near the house from the corner of her eye. Senses on sudden alert, Ruth searched the shadows cast by a row of hedges near the side of her property. She stopped moving, hesitating directly beneath the glow of a security light. For a moment, nothing moved.

“It’s all right. It’s just me.”

Ruth flinched but managed to contain her reaction to just that small movement when Marshal Blake stepped out of the darkness. Blake seemed like a different person than the last time Ruth saw her. She was dressed in dark jeans, sneakers and a dark button-down shirt. A brown leather bomber jacket helped her blend into her surroundings. Ruth felt a sense of irritation wash over her and didn’t attempt to hide her scowl.

“Oh no, what are you doing here?”

“Can’t a person take a walk?”

“Sure and I really believe that. You just happened to take a walk in my neighborhood at night and hide in the bushes near my house. I didn’t even see your car.”

“Who said I was hiding?” Marshal Blake stepped under the glow from the overhead light. Her drawl seemed more pronounced than the last time they’d seen each other. “Actually, I climbed over the fence.”

Ruth shook her head. “You’re truly unbelievable. Whatever, I’m not going to argue with you. What do you want, Agent Blake?”

“That’s Marshal Blake. My friends call me Emma.”

“Well, since I’m not your friend I don’t have to worry about that. Can we cut to the chase please?”

Blake glanced around uncomfortably. “Do you mind if we go inside to talk?”

Ruth almost told her to go to hell. She wasn’t keen on the idea of letting Blake into her home. On the other hand, the sooner they got this over with the sooner Blake would leave. Ruth nodded and headed up the steps. She led the way into the house.

“You left the front door unlocked?”

Blake sounded surprised and Ruth watched her carefully bolt the door behind them. She thought it was a bit paranoid, but dutifully led the way into the sitting room. Ruth chose the sofa and indicated that Marshal Blake should take the chair adjacent.

“So what’s going on? I told you I didn’t want protection.”

“True,” Marshal Blake allowed, “but that doesn’t mean I stop doing my job. I’m still investigating a crime.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I thought federal agents had to be invited by local law enforcement before they could conduct investigations in their jurisdiction.”

“You’re thinking of the FBI and you watch too much television. I am a federal marshal. I conduct investigations wherever they are warranted.”

Ruth was far too tired to argue semantics. The truth was that she didn’t know the scope of a marshal’s duties, nor did she care. “You’ve got me there. If you’re not here to protect me, why are you skulking around my home?”

“I’m just covering my bases. You may not believe the Carlotti family is after you, but I do. I’d be remiss if I didn’t ensure your safety, whether you want it or not.”

Ruth didn’t buy her explanation. They’d been over this ground before. “Mission accomplished, Marshal. You can leave.”

“Why don’t you call me Emma?”

“Why don’t you tell me what you really want?”

Marshal Blake smiled, her teeth startling white against her deep tan. The intensity of the tingling in her stomach surprised Ruth, but Blake didn't seem to notice. "You don't give an inch, do you?"

Ruth ignored the question. "Since you're here, Emma, will you tell me something?"

"Shoot."

"If you know so much about the Carlottis, why don't you just arrest them?"

"It's called proof. In this country, it's required before we can take a person into custody. We're doing everything we can. Remember, we have someone who can testify against Franco Carlotti if we can keep him safe long enough."

"I remember," Ruth asserted. "I also remember that your witness is a cold-blooded killer who is getting off scot-free in exchange for his information. It doesn't seem fair."

"No one said the world was fair."

Emma's hand rested on the chair arm. Her fingertips stroked the fabric, drawing Ruth's attention. The contact resonated within Ruth, seeming sensual. A tremor passed through her and she attempted to focus on the discussion.

"No, the world isn't fair, but this isn't Chicago or the 1920s, and this guy isn't Al Capone. He isn't untouchable."

"Like I said, Miss Gallagher, too much television. Keep in mind that Capone was sent to prison for tax evasion. Sometimes all it takes is a small stone to topple the giant."

"It's Ruth, remember? Do you think I'm that stone? Is that why you're really here?"

Emma stood unexpectedly and moved over beside Ruth on the sofa. She was close enough that Ruth could feel the heat of her skin. Belatedly, Ruth realized the blue of her shirt matched the shade of Emma's eyes. Although she sat closely, Ruth couldn't say that Emma had crossed over any professional boundaries. Despite that fact, the temperature in the room seemed to have increased substantially.

"I'm not sure about that. Maybe I just wanted to find out more about you."

"Personally or professionally?" Ruth swallowed hard, unsure if she wanted to hear the answer.

"Personally."

Ruth scooted a few inches away from Emma. "Um, no offense, but I'm seeing someone."

"The woman from the hospital?"

"Yes, Jordan." Ruth wondered why she was having such trouble speaking in complete sentences.

"I don't see a ring on your finger. Is it serious?"

Ruth frowned. She didn't really know. She'd had one night with Jordan. That wasn't exactly a recipe for a committed relationship. Ruth realized that Emma had taken her silence for an admission of sorts. Emma leaned forward and kissed her softly. Ruth inhaled the musky scent of Emma's perfume, unable to move away.

Because she didn't push, Ruth relaxed into the caress. Emma simply pressed against her lips for a few seconds before withdrawing. It took a moment before Ruth realized she couldn't allow this. With her luck, this was all a ruse. Marshal Blake was just trying to get her to lower her guard so Ruth would allow her to hang around. Ruth had refused official protection so this was probably another way for Emma to get what she wanted. It was a waste of time and Ruth refused to be a pawn.

She stood abruptly. "I think you should go now."

"I'm sorry if I've offended you. I'll admit that my kisses don't usually have that effect."

Ruth ignored the attempt at levity and crossed her arms. "Please leave."

Emma nodded and headed for the door with Ruth close behind. She stopped partially through the door and turned back. "I know you think my theory is half-baked, but lock the door anyway. Okay?"

As suspicious as she was of Blake's motives, Ruth still felt warmed by her concern. Torn by an unexpected attraction and hurt over being used, Ruth couldn't answer. Instead, she nodded. She locked the door after Emma left and followed through by checking that all doors and windows inside the house were secure. She tried not to think anything more about Emma Blake and headed upstairs.

Ruth suddenly decided she'd had enough of staying indoors. Four days of isolation was enough and she needed to get on with her life. She couldn't dwell on what had happened. Ruth thought that if she remained inside any longer she might as well settle for life as a hermit surrounded by six cats. With the image of Ruth the crazy cat lady in her head, she showered and prepared for bed. It wasn't until she slid beneath the sheets that Ruth realized she hadn't heard from Jordan at all today. Maybe Jordan had concluded Ruth was no longer interested.

Tomorrow, she would remedy that situation. Ruth would go to the country club first thing and play eighteen holes of golf. She needed to prepare for the tournament scheduled later in the year, but after that she would call Jordan. Perhaps she could talk her into coming over for an intimate dinner for two. Ruth fell asleep in the middle of her mental preparations, barely stirring when the ground vibrated in a typical California tremor.

Chapter Twelve

RUTH FINISHED THE eighteenth hole with a birdie. She felt delighted with her performance today. All holes except one, she had completed under par. Not too bad considering she'd spent more time lately in the hospital rather than on the golf course. Ruth knocked the head of her putter against the bottom of her shoe before returning it to the bag. The gesture didn't really have a purpose. It was just a habit, something she'd picked up from her father when he taught her the game.

After putting the club away, Ruth hefted the golf bag off the ground and started toward the cart. She felt particularly rested and healthy today. Even the extra weight of the clubs wasn't enough to bother her leg. Ruth stowed the clubs in the rear of the golf cart and then climbed behind the wheel. She took a moment to look around and appreciate the day. It felt like an eternity since she'd done something so simple as enjoying the moment. Several of the country club patrons she saw wore golf outfits as loud as her own.

Ruth smirked and looked down at her green and yellow striped calf-high socks. They didn't exactly go with her knee-length blue shorts. She laughed and popped the brake on the golf cart. Ruth wiped her sweaty brow with a handkerchief with one hand while she steered toward the clubhouse with the other.

The front exterior of the club boasted a bank of darkened windows. The reflective surfaces winked at her in the bright sunshine. They called to her like a siren's song, luring Ruth into the air conditioned interior. After a couple of hours on the golf course, a cool drink at the bar sounded nice. Out of habit caused by lingering paranoia, Ruth scanned the parking lot and the area immediately adjacent to the building.

Since it was the middle of a workday, there were few cars in the parking lot. A few men wore suits and ties and Ruth figured they were businessmen trying to squeeze in a few holes on their lunch hour. No one stood out. There weren't any signs of murderous chauffeurs or mafia hit men. Ruth tried to find humor in the thought but she just couldn't. Worse yet, her dreams of that terrible day on the cliff had intensified lately. Suddenly, Ruth's mood shifted and she felt exhausted from the lack of quality sleep. Now, the sun seemed scorching hot instead of gently caressing. A car backfired somewhere and Ruth flinched, tense with apprehension.

"Maybe I'll have more than one."

She had never been much of a drinker, but she thought that with enough alcohol she might actually sleep through the night. A full eight hour sleep without nightmares sounded like heaven.

Ruth had just parked in front of the club and shut off the cart when her cell phone rang. She smiled when she saw the caller display. She leaned back against the seat and willed the unpleasant thoughts away while she answered the phone.

"Hey you. I thought you were busy saving lives."

"Oh, I am," Jordan responded. She sounded happy and full of energy. "Fortunately, my rotation in the emergency room is pretty quiet so far. I thought I'd check in with my favorite person. Is this a good time?"

“Your timing is impeccable. I just finished the course and was about to stop by the club for something cold. I’m glad you called.”

“Happy enough to have dinner with me tonight?” Ruth hesitated only a second, but apparently it was enough to concern Jordan. “We can just order in at my apartment. Maybe watch a movie? I know you’re not much for crowds these days.”

“I’m not sure, Jordan. It’s not that I don’t want to see you. I’m just so busy what with taking care of the insurance stuff on the car and trying to get back into a routine with playing golf.”

There was a long pause before Jordan asked, “Ruth, are you avoiding me?”

Ruth took a deep breath and made a decision. It was time for the truth. “Maybe a little. It’s just that...seeing you reminds me of what happened on Ghost Island. I know it shouldn’t and you saved my life and everything, but there it is.”

“I understand.” Ruth could hear the hesitation in Jordan’s voice and her heart went out to her. “What do you think about making some new memories? If we see each other here, in L.A., maybe you won’t think about what happened.”

Despite her trepidation, Ruth chuckled. Jordan was nothing if not persistent. She also had a point. Ruth certainly wasn’t going to get over her experience on the island unless she deliberately pushed her way past it. The way her heart raced when she heard Jordan’s voice encouraged her to at least try.

“Okay, you have a point. I would love to see you tonight.”

The conversation went on for only a few more minutes. When she ended the call, Ruth felt more positive than she had before speaking with Jordan. The fact that Jordan could have such a profound influence on her emotions spoke volumes. Initially, she had rushed to reassure Jordan that she wanted to see her out of a misguided attempt to prevent hurting her feelings. Now, Ruth realized she’d meant every word. She had spent quite enough time alone lately and dwelling on the reality of Henry’s perfidy wasn’t an emotionally sound decision. It was time to face the facts and move on with her life. Ruth couldn’t be responsible for Henry’s actions, but she could focus on the good things and Jordan figured prominently in that decision.

With her mind made up, Ruth reversed the golf cart and then drove it over to the club’s storage lot. She parked the vehicle and went inside the country club only long enough to drop off the keys. It was early afternoon and barring some type of emergency, Jordan would leave the hospital somewhere around five. They had agreed Ruth would arrive at Jordan’s apartment around six. She intended to spend the rest of her afternoon getting ready for their date. Ruth smiled, thinking she might even pack an overnight bag...just in case.

Her positive mood restored, Ruth took a cab home. She wasn’t due to get the Jaguar out of the shop for another week. It also took longer to get home without her own vehicle since the cabbie insisted on choosing the most crowded streets. She could have driven her Escalade, but found it difficult to navigate on the crowded city streets and without a driver, the limo was out of the question. The taxi was easier.

Finally home, Ruth paid the cab driver and sent him away. She took a moment to look around for any unexpected company, but Marshal Blake was nowhere in sight. Apparently, Emma had finally realized she was wasting her time hanging around Ruth’s home. She ignored the brief surge of disappointment.

Relieved that she didn’t have to entertain the wayward marshal, Ruth let herself into the house. Her priority was a nice, hot, soaking bath.

EXCITEMENT HUMMED THROUGH her veins as Ruth prepared to leave the house. She felt perfumed and pampered, ready to see and hold Jordan in her arms. She carried a leather satchel with a change of clothes and the necessary toiletries for an overnight stay. Another cab waited for her in the circular drive. Ruth piled into the car and gave the driver her destination. The cabbie grunted and mashed the accelerator to the floor. Unlike the previous driver who had chosen a slow, deliberate pace, this one seemed intent on impressing her with his speed.

Ruth strapped in and held on to the door handle. After a few close calls with other traffic, the cab squealed to a halt outside Jordan's brownstone. Ruth climbed out of the car on shaking legs, thrilled to have made the trip in one piece.

"Thanks a lot," Ruth said somewhat sarcastically.

The driver didn't comment, nor did he offer Ruth any change for the bills she handed him. He merely grunted and squealed away from the curb. Ruth instinctively jumped backward onto the curb to keep from having her toes run over. She took a moment to settle her nerves before heading up the steps.

Ruth shook off the feeling of having experienced Mr. Toad's Wild Ride and pushed the call button on the front of the building. Jordan responded immediately, buzzing her into the secured structure. Only after entering the lobby did Ruth realize she'd been so shaken by the cab ride that she had neglected to check out the area where Jordan lived. Ruth had never been to Jordan's apartment before, obtaining the directions for the first time during the phone conversation at the country club.

Somewhat belatedly, Ruth scoped out the ground floor. The main lobby contained only a single desk, a chair and a row of security monitors. A uniformed security guard occupied the chair and offered her a friendly wave. Ruth appreciated the setup as well as the Italian marble floors and the large waterfall that occupied one corner.

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

Ruth started slightly but covered it by replying that she was looking for Jordan Pierce's apartment. She gave him the apartment number as well, unsure if he would know the building occupants by name.

"Down at the end of the hall to your right. My name's Dave if you need anything."

"Thanks."

The brownstone was top notch by any standards, but didn't really seem to fit Jordan's personality. To Ruth, it seemed that Jordan should have something that would provide a bit more privacy. Then again she did have her home on Ghost Island. The apartment was merely a place to hang her hat during the workweek.

Ruth pushed away the unpleasant memories that surfaced at the thought of Ghost Island and started down the corridor Dave had indicated. She quickly located Jordan's apartment and had just raised her hand to knock when the door flew open unexpectedly. Jordan's excitement upon seeing her was contagious and Ruth smiled back. She suddenly found herself swallowed in a huge hug. The familiar scent of Jordan's perfume surrounded her and Ruth wondered why she'd been holding back.

"I'm so happy you're here," Jordan whispered into her ear. She moved back so she could see Ruth. "Part of me worried that you would change your mind."

Ruth could have sworn that she saw tears glistening in Jordan's eyes. "It never occurred to me," she lied.

Jordan nodded and finally noticed the bag Ruth carried. She didn't comment, but her smile widened as she stepped back.

"Why don't you come inside? I think we've given the neighbors enough gossip material for now."

"What are you talking about? There's no one around."

"That's all right. I'm sure Dave will be thrilled to tell everyone he knows."

Ruth turned to see what Jordan was looking at. Dave was watching them with unabashed delight. He waved at them, showing no sign of remorse. Ruth almost rolled her eyes. She'd been hiding at home for days to avoid spying eyes and in less than thirty minutes Ruth found herself right back under the microscope.

"Yeah, good idea. Let's go inside."

Jordan took her bag and ushered Ruth inside, closing the door behind them. She dropped it on the floor beside the door and Ruth looked around the apartment. Ruth knew Jordan had good taste, but she was astonished by the richly appointed dwelling. The Italian marble from the lobby continued into the foyer of Jordan's apartment. A large crystal chandelier glistened overhead and from the glints of gold, Ruth figured it probably cost her entire year's income. Leather furnishings in the living room framed an Aqueon fireplace. Ruth had researched this type of freestanding fireplace for her own home and knew they ran around fifty thousand dollars.

"This place is amazing."

"Thank you." Jordan settled on the black leather sofa and patted the place beside her. "Come sit with me."

Without thinking, Ruth did as she was bade, but her attention remained on the accommodations. Finally, she turned to Jordan with stunned expression. "How can you afford this? I'm sorry...I didn't mean to be so blunt, but this place must cost you a fortune."

Jordan grinned. "I'm very good at what I do. You should know since you were one of my patients."

"Well, okay. I can't argue with that."

"I'll give you the grand tour later, but right now I'd really like to catch up. I've missed you."

Ruth flushed in pleased embarrassment. She squeezed Jordan's hand. "I've missed you, too."

"Are you feeling better now?"

Jordan sounded unsure, as though she expected the worst. Her timidity made Ruth feel even worse. "Yes, honey, I feel much better. I just needed some time off. I'm sorry if I made you think I don't want to spend time with you."

"It's not that," Jordan assured her. "I've just been so worried. It's not every day you see U.S. Marshals show up at the hospital to interview your girlfriend."

"Girlfriend, huh? I kind of like the sound of that."

Jordan raised their clasped hands and gently kissed Ruth's knuckles. The smoldering look in her eyes caused a shiver to race down Ruth's spine. "Me too. Now before I get sidetracked, I want to hear all about what you've been up to. Did you get everything worked out with the car?"

"Yes, in fact the mechanic promised to have someone deliver the Jaguar to me by the end of the week."

"They're going to actually drive the car out to your house for you? How come I don't get that kind of service?"

“Well, I did promise them a bonus,” Ruth admitted. She thought about the cab ride over and said, “I can’t wait to get my car back. I miss my car.”

“Ah, bribery. Works every time. Still, I guess that means the frame wasn’t bent or anything.”

“Right, surprising considering how badly dented it was from that maniac driver.”

“At least he turned himself in,” Jordan pointed out. “You never did tell me what the marshals wanted at the hospital.”

Ruth hesitated, suddenly feeling a little uncomfortable. She realized it was only normal that Jordan would ask, but wasn’t sure she wanted to discuss the issue. Rather than just blow Jordan off altogether, she said, “They just wanted the whole story on Henry, that’s all.”

“Oh really?” She laughed in a teasing way. “Because from where I sat, it looked like the lady Fed had her eye on you.”

“No,” Ruth sputtered, thinking again about the kiss she had shared with Emma. “It wasn’t that at all. They really were just asking about Henry.”

“And that took twenty minutes?” Suddenly, Jordan didn’t seem quite so amused.

“Ruth...don’t you trust me? I know you went through a lot with Henry. He was your friend and you thought you really knew him. It’s only natural that you’d be a little paranoid, but I’m not Henry. I want you to be able to confide in me.”

Shamed at her behavior by a few simple words, Ruth looked away. Jordan had a point. She still couldn’t meet Jordan’s eyes, but she broke down and told her everything from the belief that Henry was involved with the mob to the fact that Blake wanted to put Ruth into protective custody. She finished up by telling Jordan that she had refused the offer of protection.

“Why would you refuse? If they’re concerned for your safety, shouldn’t you go along with them? These guys are the professionals.”

“It’s pointless, Jordan. I mean, yeah, I’ve had some odd dreams since the incident with Henry, but I don’t have any real memories of that time on the cliff.”

“What do you mean by odd dreams?”

Ruth shrugged. “I guess they’re more impressions, really. I keep getting flashes of someone up on the escarpment with Karl. I don’t even know if it was a man or woman, but they were dressed in camouflage. That’s all.”

“You said the Feds think Carlotti is after you because he believes Karl told you about this guy...what was his name?”

“I don’t know his name. No one ever told me. I only know that Karl operated on someone who turned state’s evidence against the Carlotti family. Apparently, these mobsters killed Karl after he wouldn’t give them information on where to find him.”

Jordan released Ruth’s hand and scooted toward the edge of the sofa. “Are you sure Karl never said anything about this guy. Think, Ruth. You could be in real trouble here.”

“Oh not you too. Karl never brought it up. It had nothing to do with me. I think I would have remembered if my best friend told me he’d operated on an informant for the mob.”

“Fine.” Jordan held her hands up in surrender. “But you did see someone up on the cliff. You just said so yourself.”

“Yeah, but I don’t really remember any details. Just that there was someone up there.”

“You don’t remember now,” Jordan pointed out. “That doesn’t mean you won’t recall something else later.”

That caught Ruth off guard. She hadn’t really considered that she might later remember a detail that would put her life in jeopardy. She didn’t know what to say. Fortunately, her stomach rumbled and interrupted the conversation. Jordan smiled at her and headed for the phone.

“What do you like on your pizza?”

“Normally, I like pepperoni and onions, but I think we should skip the onions this time.”

“Good idea. How about we substitute mushrooms for the onions?”

Ruth agreed and Jordan made the call. While Jordan was on the phone, Ruth took the opportunity to relax. The discussion about Carlotti had her all keyed up again, just when she was beginning to unwind. She was determined not to talk about the mobster again. When Jordan returned to her side, it seemed she had also decided to drop the unpleasant discussion.

“So what are you going to do for the rest of the week? You know, I just realized that we’ve never really talked about what you do with your free time,” Jordan admitted. “I know you’re a professional golfer, but that’s all.”

“That’s about all there is to know. In fact, now that things have settled down a little, I plan to get back into a routine. I’ve got Dinah Shore coming up in a few months and I need to get out on the course.”

“Like you were today? What does that entail...getting to the country club at the crack of dawn?”

“Not quite.” Ruth laughed at the image of swinging a club at a little white ball while it was still dark. “I do try to get there around seven or eight. I can get in eighteen holes, have lunch and relax for a while and then start all over.”

“Yikes, that sounds like overkill.”

“You know the old adage, practice makes perfect.”

Her comment sounded a little flat to her own ears as Ruth realized all the questions were making her uncomfortable. It felt like Jordan had been asking them since she walked through the door.

“Just do me a favor and take it easy, okay? There is such a thing as overdoing things and I am still your doctor. I’d hate to see you have a relapse.”

“I don’t really think that’ll be a problem. I’m enjoying the exercise. It feels like so long since I’ve done anything.”

Jordan merely nodded and then said, “Speaking of doctors, you haven’t heard anything from Fuller have you? After the hospital fired him, he seems to have dropped off the face of the planet.”

“What’s up with all the questions? You sound like Emma...uh, I mean Marshal Blake.”

“Emma, huh?” The teasing glint was back in Jordan’s eyes. “Have you seen her since leaving the hospital?”

Damn it, Ruth had walked right into that. “She came by the house to ask a few more questions. It was no big deal.”

“I think I’m getting a little jealous.”

“Don’t be.” Ruth turned toward Jordan, pulling her knee up on the sofa. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I guess I am being somewhat paranoid after everything that’s happened.”

Jordan reached up and ran her finger along Ruth’s jawline, causing goose bumps to break out in her wake. “I promise not to ask any more questions. Let’s just watch a movie together and enjoy the pizza. Later, we can catch up by enjoying each other.”

“Um, now that’s something I can get behind.”

Ruth closed the distance between them and gently kissed Jordan. Things were heating up nicely by the time the delivery boy arrived. Jordan left her side long enough to pay for the pizza. Then the box landed on the dining room table and stayed there for the rest of the night. They never did eat dinner or even start the movie, but Ruth did get a nice tour of Jordan’s bedroom.

“NOW ISN’T A good time.”

Ruth slowly opened her eyes to the darkness of Jordan’s bedroom. Jordan’s sleepy voice had awakened her. At first Ruth felt confused, but then she realized Jordan was speaking on the phone. That wasn’t really surprising. Jordan was a physician. She probably received calls in the middle of the night on a regular basis.

Not quite awake, Ruth snuggled back into the pillow. She sought the oblivion of sleep once more, mildly curious about why it wasn’t a good time for Jordan. Ruth couldn’t imagine a right occasion when it was the middle of the night.

“Yes, I have company. It is and no...nothing yet.”

Jordan hesitated and even in Ruth’s relaxed state, she thought Jordan seemed tense. That alone chased the cobwebs away. Ruth kept her eyes closed but listened intently.

“Now isn’t the time,” Jordan snapped, attempting to keep her voice low. Ruth had never heard her use such a tone before. “We’ll talk about it tomorrow.”

A beep indicated that Jordan had terminated the connection. Ruth felt her moving and seconds later an arm encircled her waist. Warm air brushed the back of her neck as Jordan spooned her.

“Who was that?” Ruth kept the question soft, as though barely awake.

“Shh, don’t worry about it. One of the doctors at the hospital has insomnia and thinks three in the morning is a good time to compare patient test results. Go back to sleep.”

“Hmm, too late. I’m already awake.” Ruth turned over and gently bit Jordan’s chin.

Fingertips trailed up over her hip.

“What did you have in mind?”

Ruth smiled. “Why don’t you guess?” She prevented Jordan from doing so by kissing her.

Chapter Thirteen

TIME PASSED QUICKLY and before she knew it, the week was almost over. On Friday afternoon, Ruth sat in the country club's lounge soaking up the air conditioning and sipping an iced tea. Ruth placed the glass on the table and reached down to rub her aching thigh. Perhaps Jordan had a point when she cautioned Ruth not to overdo it. Two rounds of golf after several months away from the course might be too much. Ruth thought all the exercise had even started to affect her dreams.

They were getting more and more vivid. Last night she'd actually dreamed that Jordan was up on the mountain with her and Karl. Other than attributing the dreams solely to over-exertion, Ruth took it as a sign that she really missed Jordan. She hadn't seen her since they'd awakened together on Tuesday morning. Ruth hoped Jordan wasn't working too hard and that she'd get a chance to see her this weekend. She toyed with the idea of inviting Jordan to spend the weekend with her at the manor house.

Ruth's thigh throbbed again and she glanced down at the appendage with a frown. Despite the very real possibility that she was overdoing things, Ruth refused to concede defeat. She was convinced she could push through the pain and come out stronger on the other side. It was like losing weight. There was always a plateau.

Convinced despite the weak logic, Ruth swallowed the last of her drink and tossed some bills on the table. She left enough to cover her lunch along with a generous tip and then vacated the club. Squinting in the bright sunshine, Ruth scanned the immediate area. It was a new habit inspired by recent events and Emma Blake's wild mobster theories. She was happy to see her car sitting right where it should be.

The mechanic had returned the car a few days ago. She had driven it to the golf course each day since. So far, no one had planted a car bomb on it lending credence to her own theory that Blake was a little melodramatic.

A reflection caught her eye and Ruth checked out the black Town Car sitting at the far end of the parking lot. She noticed that it sat empty, as usual. Ruth had been coming to the Sands Country Club for years. She recognized all of the vehicles belonging to the regular patrons and had never seen the Lincoln before this week. The Town Car sat in the same space every morning before Ruth arrived and was still in place when she left. The car didn't seem abandoned, but she hadn't seen anyone near the vehicle at any time.

Ruth finally looked away from the car and headed toward her golf cart, letting go of the minor mystery. She had another eighteen holes to go before she could head home. Ruth walked down the sidewalk, not really paying attention. She had just started to step down onto the parking lot when the squeal of tires and the sound of a racing engine brought her abruptly back to the present.

A white van stopped directly in front of her. Time seemed to slow down as her mind raced forward. Ruth heard the squeak of metal caused by the vehicle settling on its axles after the quick

stop. Even as the panel door slid aside, she knew what was happening but there wasn't time to run or call out for help.

Two men grabbed her arms and hauled Ruth into the van's cargo area. In the blink of an eye, she lay on a dirty, smelly carpet facing an adversary who didn't even attempt to conceal their identity. She knew what that meant, but it was far too late to lament ignoring Emma's warnings.

The men had tossed her a few feet away from them and sat facing Ruth with their backs toward the driver. With no seats to hamper her movements, Ruth lashed out with her foot and smashed one of the men in the nose. Blood ran down over his mustache and she felt grim satisfaction at leaving behind some physical damage. Before she could do anything else, the second man drew a black pistol from his waistband and leveled it in her direction. The fight quickly went out of her and Ruth raised her hands in surrender.

"What do you want with me?"

Ruth kept her voice calm and demanding despite the fear pounding through her veins. Her assailants weren't impressed. The one with the gun smiled at her bravado while the other wiped the blood from his face and then rubbed it into the van's carpeting. Unaccountably, Ruth wondered how much blood the carpet had seen in the past.

Both men were large and powerful. From the bulge of muscles, Ruth guessed their size couldn't be attributed to an overindulgence in cannoli. The one with the mustache wore dark sunglasses and sideburns that belonged in the 1970s. The other was clean shaven, including the top of his head. Ruth found only one obvious identifying mark on the second man: a large cobra tattoo on the side of his neck. She had a pretty good idea who sent them, but Mustache Man answered her anyway.

"The boss wants to have a word with you. Now be a good little girlie and we'll drop you off right where we found you when he's done."

Sure they would. Ruth wasn't delusional. They intended to drop off her lifeless corpse or they wouldn't have let her see their faces. Unfortunately, staring down the barrel of the living cue ball's gun gave Ruth few options. She wasn't trained in fighting techniques and if she tried anything, he would probably shoot her. Just because Carlotti wanted to interrogate her didn't mean Cue Ball couldn't put a bullet in her arm or leg. Ruth would have to be smarter than that. She could only pray that they'd let down their guard at some point. When they did, she'd have to be ready.

To hurry these men into doing just that, Ruth allowed her shoulders to sag. She attempted to look completely defeated by dropping her gaze to the floor. No one spoke again, but she used her peripheral vision to look for anything that could be a makeshift weapon. The van was clean. The only item of use was the pistol in Cue Ball's hand.

Ruth wondered if a person could grow accustomed to being in mortal danger. She didn't feel as panicked as when Henry had chased her through the storm though surely these men were just as threatening. Perhaps more so. Carlotti, or more specifically his people, had tortured Karl for information. It was a sure bet that Carlotti wouldn't get his hands dirty by doing the deed himself. Regardless, it wouldn't matter that Ruth knew nothing. They would kill her just as they had Karl, probably with a smile on their faces. The fact that Carlotti was still pursuing Ruth at all meant Karl hadn't told him anything. Inspired by his courage, Ruth vowed not to give these men the satisfaction of seeing her beg for her life.

Despite her resolve, Ruth's concern ratcheted up another notch. She could tell from the speed and lack of regular stops that they were on the freeway and headed out of the city. Traffic wasn't overly heavy at this time of day. She wondered how she could get away from the men and she

searched the vehicle for any possible way out. Ruth noticed the panel door wasn't locked and briefly wondered if she could escape that way. Unfortunately, at this speed, the fall would kill her instantly. Then again, her new friends were sure to do the very same thing before long. Her eyes wandered back to her captors and she discovered both of them watching her intently.

"Don't even think about it," Cue Ball said in a deep bass. "You'll only get yourself killed. Maybe the boss would be willing to let you go after he...talks with you."

Ruth didn't believe that for a second. Despite that fact, Ruth knew she wouldn't act. She would have to keep her eyes open and pray for a chance before these men tried to kill her. Ruth resumed her earlier posture and kept her eyes pinned on her wristwatch. If somehow she did manage to escape, she needed to know how far they traveled. She estimated ten minutes had passed since she'd been snatched from the country club parking lot. They drove another ten before the driver exited the freeway. As they moved farther from the city, roads became smaller and traffic lighter. Eventually, they left the pavement and bounced down a gravel road. Houses here were few and far between.

When the van rumbled across a cattle guard, Ruth got thrown off balance and rapped her head against the side of the vehicle. She looked outside through the front windshield, but didn't see any signs of livestock. In fact, there were no signs of any life whatsoever. A rundown farmhouse came into view. From the missing shingles on the roof to the front door that sagged on busted hinges, Ruth decided the place was deserted.

Trees surrounded the property, perfect for obscuring any prying eyes. A black limo sat parked in the weeds in front of the house and Ruth swallowed hard. She was convinced she'd squandered any chance of escape. There certainly wouldn't be any help out here in the sticks.

The van stopped beside the limo and only the driver moved. He exited and came around to open the side panel door while the two who'd grabbed Ruth kept a close eye on her. She thought they just didn't want to take a chance that she'd kick someone in the nose again.

"Move it," Cue Ball ordered, motioning her with the barrel of the gun.

Ruth climbed stiffly out of the cargo area and headed toward the house. A shove in the middle of her back hurried her along faster. She glanced over her shoulder, but couldn't decide who had pushed her. All three escorted her inside, through the living room and into the kitchen. The smell of mildew assaulted her. Heavy cobwebs covered the ceiling and the corners. Ruth didn't think anyone had lived here in a long time. The only furniture in the house was a single, hard-backed chair sitting in the middle of the kitchen. It was occupied.

Ruth stopped so quickly that the gun barrel jabbed into her back. She recognized the man. He was the same one she'd seen in the cemetery the day she visited Karl's grave. He wore the same floppy brown, felt fedora and had the same lean, wiry build. This close up, Ruth noticed his eyes for the first time. They were the eyes of a shark: vicious, cold and without compassion. Although thin, Carlotti's arms bunched with muscle. For a man who appeared in his early sixties, Ruth thought him perfectly capable of killing anyone himself.

"Vinny, stay here. Marcus and Tommy, go help secure the perimeter."

Ruth noticed the heavy Italian accent, but was more interested in the way Carlotti distributed his people. Vinny turned out to be Cue Ball. Apparently, Carlotti wanted the thug with the gun to remain. She thought they were probably all armed. His was just the only weapon Ruth had seen. Carlotti had told the other two to "help" secure the area. Someone else was here, but there could only be one or two more. The limousine wouldn't hold an army. There were at least five, but currently there was only a single flunky with a gun and a tired-looking old man in the room with her.

All of Ruth's fear suddenly evaporated like mist and she looked more closely at the man who'd ordered her murder. Carlotti's hands clasped the carved ivory top of a cane, the tip braced against the wooden floor. His swarthy complexion carried a rosy tinge of health that told Ruth Carlotti probably carried the cane as a fashion accessory. She felt the malevolence oozing from the seated man.

"Mister Carlotti, I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding."

Ruth failed to account for Vinny's proximity. He backhanded her across the face with his pistol. The blow knocked Ruth to the floor and she automatically raised her hand to cup her cheek. Pain caused tears to spring to her eyes and it took a second to get her bearings. Ruth's fingers came away stained with blood.

"Shut up. You don't talk except to answer questions."

Vinny moved toward her and Ruth flinched, expecting another blow. He froze when Don Carlotti raised a palsied hand.

"I will ask you a question," Carlotti said, speaking in a casually conversational tone. "If I don't like your answer, Vinny will hurt you. We will keep going until I am satisfied. Do you understand?" He smiled, carrying forward with the polite façade.

It seemed pretty straightforward. Of course she understood, but there wasn't anything she could say to appease this killer. They were going to torture her and then murder her and she wouldn't be able to stop them. Ruth nodded her head, but stayed where she had fallen. There was no point in getting up.

Before the interrogation could begin, the back door to the kitchen opened and another person entered the house. At first, Ruth thought she was hallucinating. She closed her eyes tightly and shook her head. When Ruth opened her eyes again, the scene hadn't changed.

"Ah," Carlotti smiled and held his hand out toward the newcomer. "You're just in time."

Jordan Pierce accepted *Don* Carlotti's hand and stooped down to kiss his tanned cheek. She straightened and had the temerity to smile at Ruth.

"Jordan?" Ruth couldn't keep the tremor out of her voice. She had never seen this coming, though now that the truth stood right in front of her, she didn't know why. "Nurse Flanagan told me you asked to be assigned to my case. She said you demanded it."

"You really are a poor judge of character, Ruth."

"Why?"

"Because I told her to get close to you," Carlotti snapped, "to find out what you knew."

"And did you tell her to sleep with me too?"

Carlotti's face darkened and his jaw clenched, but he didn't rise to the bait. "What do you know about the man who threatens my family?"

The wording of the question threw Ruth off guard. After a moment, she realized he was asking about the informant. She considered not answering until she saw Jordan's face tighten. Now she had the answer to why Jordan was here. Carlotti intended to force Jordan to hurt her if Ruth refused to cooperate. A large part of her believed Jordan wouldn't do it. She was a physician and had taken an oath to do no harm. On the other hand, she stood there holding hands with a confirmed killer and showed no concern for Ruth as she lay bleeding on the floor. Ruth had trusted Henry, too, and that hadn't turned out well.

At her continued silence, Jordan shook her head and released Carlotti's hand. She closed the distance until she stood only inches from Ruth. "I suggest you answer."

"Jordan, I don't know anything. You know that."

“Then why were you getting cozy with Marshal Blake? We’ve had people watching you since Henry failed.”

The sense of betrayal was becoming commonplace though this time Ruth felt the sting more deeply. “I told you that she wanted me to go into protective custody. She didn’t tell me anything other than the fact that there was an informant. She never told me his name and I didn’t ask. Now let me ask you a question. Why didn’t you just kill me after Henry? I never would have suspected it.”

Jordan glanced over her shoulder toward Carlotti, allowing him to answer.

“Interrogations can be so messy. You liked Jordan. She convinced me to give you a chance.”

“So if she could find out what I knew without having to torture me, so much the better? You people are pathetic.” Ruth couldn’t hide her disgust.

Jordan repaid Ruth by drawing back her fist and punching her in the face. She struck Ruth across her damaged cheek. Ruth was thrown off balance, but refused to cry out. She couldn’t prevent the single tear that tracked down her cheek.

“Watch your tone. I tried, Ruth, I really did.”

“So what changed?”

“You talk in your sleep.”

Caught off guard, Ruth stared at Jordan in disbelief. She remembered all the crazy dreams she’d had lately. One of those included seeing Jordan’s face up on the cliff. “You killed Karl.”

A triumphant expression took possession of Jordan’s face and she turned back to Carlotti. “I told you she saw me,” Jordan said excitedly.

Carlotti didn’t respond to Jordan’s jubilation. “I’ll ask once more, do you know what identity the marshals have given my snitch or where I might locate him?”

“No, I don’t.”

A single nod to Jordan caused her to act. She stooped over and grabbed Ruth by the collar with one hand. Jordan used the other to slap Ruth, concentrating the blow over the open wound. Ruth tried to struggle, pushing Jordan away while flinging her body backward at the same time. She was unable to break Jordan’s grasp. Jordan shook her hard and then stared deeply into Ruth’s eyes.

“Please answer him, Ruth. I don’t enjoy hurting you.”

The sincerity she found in Jordan’s eyes was in direct opposition to her actions. Ruth believed Jordan didn’t want to do this, but knew she would continue anyway. She had called Carlotti “Uncle.” From the time they’d spent together and their discussions while getting to know each other, Ruth knew that Jordan adored her family. She would do anything he told her.

“I already have,” she whispered brokenly.

Jordan released her and turned to Carlotti. “She’s telling the truth. She doesn’t know anything, at least not about the Snake.”

“Too bad.”

He climbed easily to his feet, carrying the cane instead of using it for support.

“Unfortunately, she knows about you and has seen too much here. Make it look like a suicide. I’ll leave Vinny here to help you. Wait for one hour. I want to make sure people see me at the board meeting before her death.”

“Yes, Uncle.”

Ruth had known it was coming, but she still couldn’t believe what she heard. Desperate to buy time, Ruth was barely aware of what she said. “No one will believe it. My car’s still at the golf course and someone probably saw you grab me.”

“She’s got a point about the car.”

Carlotti nodded. “I’ll have someone bring it out.”

Ruth could have bitten off her own tongue. She’d just helped to make her suicide more believable. However, unless they planned to hot-wire the car, they wouldn’t have much luck. Such a thing would further prove to anyone investigating her death that she hadn’t killed herself. Why would she hot-wire her own car? The only comfort she had in such an eventuality was that the incongruity would make Emma investigate even harder.

A foot to her chest forced Ruth onto her back. Suddenly she had Jordan’s knee digging into her hip and she tried not to flinch from the pressure.

“Where are they, Ruth? Give me the keys.”

Ruth merely lifted her chin in defiance. She dared Jordan to strike her again. “You’ve thought of everything, haven’t you? How are you going to explain this?” She pointed to her face.

“Not my problem. I’m not even here.” Jordan dug into the front pocket of Ruth’s trousers. She came up with the keys and backed off. “I’m currently at a seminar in the city concerning the dangers of high cholesterol.”

Carlotti took the keys and turned away without a backward glance. He left Ruth alone with a gun pointed at her face and her suddenly ex-girlfriend hovering over her. Ruth cringed internally, resolved not to show fear. She clung to hope that something would happen to provide an opportunity for escape. At least now there were only two with whom she had to contend. Carlotti would take the others and probably leave the van for Jordan and Vinny to return to the city.

“So what now?” Vinny asked. “Shoot her in the head?”

“Are you stupid?”

Jordan seemed like a completely different person. Gone was the gentle demeanor Ruth had known. She expected Vinny to mount some kind of defense against Jordan’s caustic remark, but he simply dropped his gaze. Apparently Jordan was in charge when Carlotti wasn’t around.

“Get her into the chair.”

Vinny stuffed the pistol into his waistband and grabbed Ruth by her arms. She twisted and pulled, trying to get away to no avail. Before she fully realized what they intended, Ruth was seated in the chair with Vinny holding her from behind. Jordan knelt in front of her and Ruth tried to lash out with her feet. Jordan was too close for her to get any leverage and she put her hand on Ruth’s knee to hold her down.

“It’s okay, just relax.” Jordan spoke to Ruth in a soft voice.

She sounded like she was trying to calm a frightened animal. She wasn’t far off the mark, but Ruth still hadn’t given up. Her eyes moved continuously, tracking Vinny and Jordan’s every move as she searched desperately for an opportunity.

Jordan reached into her shirt pocket and removed something small enough for her to conceal between her fingers. Ruth caught a flash of blue and realized it was a drug of some kind. She refused to open her mouth when Jordan tried to press the capsule between her lips.

“Ruth, really. I’ve been doing this a long time. Do you think I can’t force you to open your mouth?”

Stubbornly, Ruth refused to yield. Jordan was out of her mind if she thought Ruth would cooperate. A second later, it didn’t matter. Jordan did something with her thumb against Ruth’s jaw. The searing pain caused Ruth to gasp in response. The capsule was in her mouth, but she couldn’t spit it out. Jordan put her hand over Ruth’s mouth and then tilted her head way back. With her free hand, Jordan rubbed Ruth’s throat until she swallowed.

“There, see. That wasn’t so bad.”

“What did you give me?”

“Just something to help you relax.” Jordan stood and walked away until she was just out of Ruth’s line of sight. When she returned, she carried a vodka bottle. She grasped Ruth’s chin and put the bottle against her teeth.

Ruth spit and tossed her head, trying not to swallow. Still, the liquor burned a trail down her throat. Suddenly, inspiration struck. Ruth had to go along with them, make them believe her to be helplessly drugged. She’d already tucked the pill between her cheek and gum before Jordan forced her to swallow.

“I thought Carlotti told you to wait an hour.”

“Don’t worry; you’ll get your hour. It’ll take a while for that pill to work.”

Ruth believed her, but Jordan wouldn’t wait out of any kindness toward her. She would follow her orders out of loyalty to a mob boss. “In that case, can you at least tell me why? I thought we really had something.”

“Oh sweetie, we did.” Jordan kissed her undamaged cheek and Ruth flinched away. “I couldn’t believe it when you ended up at my hospital. My job was to find out if Stein had told you anything useful. Imagine my delight when you showed a...personal interest in me.”

“Then why did you save me from Henry? You could have just let him take me out.”

“I told you, I really did like you. Besides, I was working so many hours that Uncle Franco didn’t tell me he sent Henry after you. I had no way to know he’d ordered it until later. I thought I was saving you from some psycho.”

“Can’t have the wrong guy take me out until you know everything you need to?”

“Yeah, you could say that. I got in a lot of trouble for that, by the way. Uncle Franco almost ordered me to stay away from you.”

Ruth allowed her eyes to droop, feigning sleepiness. “Why didn’t he?”

“Umm well, head wounds are a funny thing. I expected you to start screaming your head off the first time you saw me. Instead, it was really like you never had seen me before. No one can fake that. I knew your amnesia was genuine, but your memory could come back at anytime.”

“Or never.” The words slurred and Ruth saw Jordan smile.

She held the bottle to Ruth’s mouth again. Liquor streamed out from the corners of her lips and Ruth made a show of choking on the foul liquid. In truth, very little of the alcohol hit her stomach.

“Or never,” Jordan allowed. “I was so disappointed that you started remembering things after that incident with Henry. At least your subconscious did. As I said, you talk in your sleep. You said a few things while you were in the hospital that made me wonder. Then when we spent the night together, I knew.”

Ruth thought about that night and remembered the phone call Jordan had received. Jordan had explained it away as an overeager colleague checking on patient exams. She recalled the words Jordan had spoken on the phone and realized someone had called to see if Ruth had implicated herself yet. Even worse, Jordan had the audacity to terminate the connection and then make love to her. It was almost too much and Ruth felt her stomach clench.

“What about Fuller? Was he any part of this or was that all just make believe?”

“Nah, he’s just a bush-league pusher, but he was useful for keeping you distracted. Now let’s get this over with. I have early rounds at the hospital tomorrow. Vinny wipe down your gun and hand it to me.”

A hand disappeared from Ruth’s shoulders and she felt Vinny moving around. In front of her, Jordan removed a pair of latex gloves from her hip pocket and tugged them on. Her eyes were

calm, soft and reassuring. Ruth's heart sped up, hammering desperately to escape. This was it. Her last chance.

"Jordan?"

"What is it, honey?"

"I'm sorry."

"None of that now. It'll all be okay. I promise it won't hurt."

Vinny passed the gun back over Ruth's shoulder. Jordan took the weapon and pressed it into Ruth's right hand. She lifted both until the barrel pressed against Ruth's temple. Ruth shivered at the sensation of cold steel against her skin.

"Put your finger here, honey. That's it."

Ruth felt Jordan fumbling about a bit. It must have been a tight squeeze to get both of their fingers on the trigger. Ruth's was against the lever, but Jordan's finger would apply the pressure that would fire the shot. In essence, Jordan had accepted the responsibility of shooting Ruth in the head.

She felt Jordan's hand tighten, felt her begin to squeeze. Ruth had never fired a weapon in her life, but figured all she had to do was point and shoot. She didn't have to contend with any safeties, surely Jordan had already thought of that. When she felt Jordan begin to press down, Ruth lurched into action. She whipped her head back at the same time the shot went off and then all hell broke loose.

Ruth heard the back door to the kitchen bang open and bounce off the wall. The almost simultaneous movement combined with Ruth's actions threw Jordan off guard. Ruth planted her foot in Jordan's midsection and shoved her away. Vinny's hands were gone from her shoulders so Ruth jumped to her feet, swinging the gun around and pointing it at Jordan. Jordan had already risen and was coming after Ruth with her hands outstretched. Ruth couldn't take the chance that Jordan would get hold of the gun. She fired, surprised by the loud boom and the way the pistol kicked in her hand.

A second shot went off, but it took a second for Ruth to realize it didn't come from her gun. Ruth spun toward the door, ready to shoot.

"It's me," Emma shouted. "It's okay."

A swarm of men in blue poured into the room. They wore tactical gear and armored vests emblazoned with "SWAT." Weapons raised, they streamed past Ruth and continued into the house. Ruth glanced over her shoulder and saw Vinny lying on the floor. There was a smoking hole in the center of his chest.

Ruth dropped the gun, listening absently as it bounced on the wooden floor, and turned her head to the side. She spit the partially dissolved capsule onto the kitchen floor before she rushed to Jordan's side. Ruth slid a hand around Jordan's neck and raised her up slightly. Jordan coughed and looked up into her eyes.

"That's why you said you were sorry," Jordan whispered, blood trickling from the corner of her mouth.

Ruth nodded. "I already knew I was going to have to shoot you."

Blue eyes closed and Ruth heard Emma yelling at someone, wondering where the hell the ambulance was. Moments later, a hand rested gently against her arm. "I'm afraid she'll be gone before they can get here."

Ruth nodded, vision blurry from her tears. She had already known that. Ruth was far too close to Jordan when she fired. Even without the advantage of any sort of weapons training, there

was no way she could have missed something vital. She felt like there was a rock in her throat and couldn't speak. Her eyes stayed on Jordan until she drew her last shuddering breath.

Unable to look at Emma, Ruth asked in a broken whisper, "How did you know we were here?"

"I saw you grabbed at the country club. I'm ashamed to say I was too far away. We pulled traffic cam footage and started after them. It took a while to get the plates. That led us to the vehicle's VIN and we are very fortunate that vehicle was equipped with GPS."

Ruth didn't respond. She felt numb all over, cold and shivering one moment, hot and almost feverish the next. She knew it must be shock from all that had occurred in such a short period of time, but there was more to it than that. Jordan was the second person she had trusted without reservation and both people had tried to kill her. Jordan had come a lot closer to succeeding than Henry did. Was she just so oblivious to what was right in front of her? Surely, anyone else would have seen the writing on the wall.

"Are you okay? Ruth? Ruth?"

Chapter Fourteen

ABSENTLY, RUTH WATCHED as paramedics rushed into the room a few moments later. One of the uniformed men felt for a pulse at Jordan's neck. Ruth tried to push the truth away when he shook his head and moved on, but it was impossible. She had taken the life of someone she cared about. She was aware of movement behind her and assumed the paramedics were checking Vinny.

"Don't waste your time," someone said in a gruff voice.

The paramedic returned and squatted beside Ruth. Fingers went under her chin and forced her head up so that she would meet his eyes. She found kindness and compassion, but instinctively distrusted him. She had fallen into that trap far too often of late. Instead, Ruth kept silent while he wiped none to gently at the blood on her face with an alcohol pad. She didn't flinch when the alcohol hit the gash on her cheek. A few butterfly stitches and the man started cleaning up.

"It's not too bad, but you should see your doctor. You might have a fractured cheekbone."

"I'm not going back to the hospital."

The EMT shrugged, clearly not invested in her response. Ruth flinched at the touch of someone's hand on her shoulder. She looked up to see Emma's worried expression. "I'm fine."

"Sure you are, but why don't you have a seat over here? We need to get photos of the crime scenes and unless you'd like to be the star..."

The very idea threatened to make Ruth vomit. She nodded slowly and climbed up off the floor. Ruth couldn't believe how sore she already felt. It was almost as if she'd been in a major car accident. Emma helped her into the hard-backed chair Ruth had so recently vacated and stayed close beside her. One of the officers outfitted in tactical gear joined them to report to Emma.

"No one else around, Marshal. There's only the one van outside, but the rest of the place is empty."

"Get crime scene techs out here. I want every inch of this place swept for hair, fibers and anything else that might lead back to Carlotti."

The officer didn't waste time asking for details. He acknowledged Emma's order and then marched out of the room. As soon as they were alone, Ruth forced the words out that Emma needed to hear.

"He was here. Jordan is..." Ruth swallowed and started again. "Jordan was his niece. He ordered her to do it."

Emma knelt down and took Ruth's hand, offering her strength and comfort. "Unfortunately, without forensic proof of that, their relationship is a tenuous connection at best to what occurred here. We need hard evidence. Until then, you're the only one who can tie Carlotti to this. You know what that means don't you?"

"That you get your way?" There was a hard edge to Ruth's question that she didn't try to temper.

“I’m sorry. I know this is the last thing you want. I’ll have someone go by your place and bring you a change of clothing, but you are going to a safe house.” When Ruth attempted to object, Emma quickly continued. “At least for tonight. We’ll figure out the rest in the morning. Once Carlotti finds out what happened here, he’ll be coming for you.”

The fight abruptly left her and Ruth sagged tiredly. “Especially since I hurt his family.”

Without anything else to say, Ruth and Emma waited silently as technicians arrived and began photographing everything. Ruth watched them fingerprint every surface in the room. The medical examiner arrived and performed a cursory examination of both Jordan and Vinny. After that, the EMTs loaded both bodies into black plastic body bags. Ruth choked on her silent anguish as she watched them seal Jordan within.

“Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Ruth was surprised to see that it was completely dark outside. She estimated it was some time in the middle of the night and had difficulty believing so little time had passed. It felt like days since Vinny and Marcus grabbed her from the golf course. Officers in SWAT gear were climbing into a van.

“Why did you bring these guys?” Ruth asked, not really caring about the answer. “Why didn’t you call the locals?”

“Are you kidding? No one lives out here. The single deputy assigned to this beat is on the other side of the county helping someone change a flat tire.”

The mention of a car made Ruth’s brain re-engage in the present situation. She turned and grabbed Emma by the forearm. “My car!”

“What about it?”

“Carlotti sent some of his guys to get my car and bring it back here.”

“How long ago?”

“I don’t know. Maybe an hour?”

Emma quickly looked at her wristwatch. She muttered a curse and then jogged over to the police van before they could drive away. Emma spoke to the man inside for few minutes and then returned to Ruth’s side.

“They’ve got a description of your car and are going to wait for Carlotti’s goons at the end of the road. Their black van will blend into the terrain and they’ll get the drop on them.”

Ruth didn’t really understand what good that would do. “And then what? They’re not going to testify against their boss you know.”

“They don’t have to. We pinch them for grand theft auto. That’ll let us hold them until we can tie them to all this.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“Sometimes it is.”

“That hasn’t been my experience,” Ruth pointed out. “To date none of this has been easy.”

Emma led her to the black Lincoln Ruth had noticed in the club’s parking lot. She opened the door for Ruth, but didn’t speak again until she climbed behind the wheel.

“Why were they going to the trouble of bringing your car out here? That doesn’t seem to make sense.”

“To make my suicide more plausible. That’s what they were doing when you broke in; staging my suicide.”

“Heartless bastards,” Emma spat. “I can’t believe your girlfriend could be involved in something like this.”

Ruth felt the sting of betrayal again and turned her gaze out the passenger side window. Her voice shook as she spoke. "It gets worse."

"And I'm going to have to ask you to tell me everything, but right now you need a bath and something to eat."

Ruth became aware of the fact that she stank like vodka. Her shirt was still damp with the stuff and her skin itched where the fabric stuck to her. Emma started the car and turned on the lights, giving some illumination to the inside of the car. Ruth blinked and realized there were spots of something dark brown on her clothes.

"Oh God, I think I'm going to be sick."

She pushed open the door and rushed out, grateful that Emma hadn't started them moving yet. The bullet that ended Jordan's life had caused blowback. Ruth had only been standing a few feet away and the spray of Jordan's blood covered her clothing. She sank to her knees and puked up everything that remained in her stomach. When Ruth finished, Emma was there with a cloth. Once she had wiped Ruth's mouth, Emma took her into her arms.

The simple embrace had the effect of opening a floodgate of emotions, a torrent of recriminations, guilt and sorrow. Ruth sobbed helplessly, soaking Emma's collar with her tears. She tried to stop the flow, but was unable as the events of the day replayed over and over in her mind. Again and again, Ruth experienced the sensation of pulling the trigger and the surprise on Jordan's face as the bullet found its mark. Ruth would never forget the way she crumpled to the ground, her life's blood spilling out onto the floor.

Vaguely, Ruth became aware that Emma was uttering words of reassurance. In her current condition, she wasn't exactly sure what Emma said, but her simple presence and the warmth of another human body was enough. Finally, slowly, Ruth sat back on her heels. Emma allowed her to draw away but kept one hand on Ruth's upper arm. Her touch was sure without being confining and was exactly what Ruth needed.

"I killed her," Ruth stammered brokenly.

"You had to, sweetheart. Surely you know that. If you hadn't, she would have killed you."

Ruth started shaking her head and the movement threatened to send her out of control again. Through an effort of sheer willpower, she managed to stop. "That's not true. You were there. You came in just as it happened."

"So what?" Emma asked softly. "You think I could have taken both of them out?"

Ruth nodded and wiped at the tears on her cheeks.

"As much as I appreciate your assessment of my skills, that's not how it would have gone down, Ruth. Think about it. Everything happened so fast that things played out exactly as they had to. You did the right thing. I know that's hard to hear right now, but it's true."

Ruth was too tired to argue the point. She felt completely wrung out as she tried to stand. Emma offered her a hand, which Ruth gratefully accepted. Now that the initial emotional storm had hit and slowly passed, Ruth wanted nothing more than to get back to the city. Usually, a person wanted to escape the press of humanity in the Los Angeles city limits, but Ruth felt convinced there was safety in numbers. With so many people around, Carlotti wasn't likely to try anything. At least that's what Ruth wanted to believe.

Composed for the moment, Ruth settled back in the car and rested her head back against the seat. Her body screamed out for rest, but her muscles simply couldn't relax. Panic fluttered continuously at the edges of reason. Every movement in the shadows caused Ruth to stare in trepidation, convinced that another assassin would lunge from the darkness. When warm fingers

took her hand in a firm grasp, Ruth couldn't suppress her reaction. She gasped in fear and tried to pull away.

"It's all right, Ruth. Just try to control your breathing. Concentrate on that. I promise I'll keep you safe."

Ruth chuckled, the sound angry and harsh. "How can I believe that? I trusted Henry and Jordan, too."

"Yes, but I have a badge. I've sworn to protect the innocent."

"And Jordan was a doctor. She took an oath too, but in the end that didn't mean anything. Did it?"

Emma released her and placed her hand back on the steering wheel. "I can't blame you for your mistrust after all you've been through. Despite that, I will take care of you, Ruth."

Slowly, Ruth released the breath she'd been holding. She felt some of the tension ease. "I believe you'll try."

Her perspective shifted after that, events passing in fits and starts. So wrapped up in grief, Ruth started in bewilderment when Emma slowed and pulled down a dirt lane. At first, it appeared they'd done nothing more than drive in circles and return to the farmhouse. Goose bumps erupted on Ruth's arms and her mouth went dry. Then they passed the tree line and she saw the safe house. Relief made Ruth sag in the seat.

This place resembled the farm only in the outside setting. The house itself was a small, unassuming ranch style with a brick façade. As they approached, Ruth spotted bars on the windows. Brush and trees were cleared far enough away from the structure that residents would see anyone on approach. Another car already sat present in front of the closed garage door. Ruth tensed in dreaded anticipation.

"Easy," Emma said, briefly touching Ruth on the knee. "It's just my partner, Marshal Moore."

Ruth nodded but remained tense. Trust came hard these days even as she spotted Moore exit the house and wait for them on the porch. He took the opportunity to light up a cigarette as Emma brought the car to a stop. Ruth sat quietly for a long moment, hesitant to relinquish her seat. Entering the house meant accepting the end of her life as she knew it and embracing the confinement of witness protection. Such stark reality wasn't something Ruth could easily swallow.

As cliché as it was, memories of her thirty-seven years flashed through her mind. Growing up with a loving family, Ruth had wanted for nothing. Her career as a professional golfer was icing on the cake. Unfortunately, rats had snuck in during the night and eaten that cake as well as every drop of buttercream. Ruth just wasn't willing to accept that as yet.

"Ruth, don't argue with me over this."

"Isn't there any other way?"

Emma sighed heavily and Ruth could hear her exhaustion. "Like I said, we'll see how things look in the morning. It's late and we're all tired."

With that, Emma left Ruth sitting in the Lincoln alone. She had no choice but to follow or sit in the car for the rest of the night. Ruth was tempted to give in to the childish impulse, which was exactly why she didn't. Her stubborn denial of reality had resulted in two deaths tonight and she wouldn't be responsible for any more suffering. Jordan had died because Ruth ignored Emma's warning about Carlotti. Sitting in the car would only ensure that Emma and Marshal Moore stayed up outside to guard her.

Reluctant and heartsick, Ruth trailed behind Emma the short distance to the porch railing. Moore's eyes narrowed as he took a deep drag from his smoke and Ruth felt his ambivalence from a distance. He didn't speak, but stared at his partner for a moment before his gaze shifted to Ruth.

"Everything in order?" Emma asked.

Moore nodded and dropped the butt onto the wooden porch, crushing the ember out with expensive looking dress shoes. "We got lookouts in the bushes and the place has been cleared." He stood aside as Emma and Ruth entered the safe house.

After taking a quick look around, Ruth lost interest in the house. It seemed clean enough but still carried a neglected air as though rarely occupied. There were no pictures on the walls and only the necessary furnishings for the living room. A low, battered yellow sofa occupied one wall, flanked by two equally worn chairs. One of the chairs was a blue leather recliner with duct tape holding the stuffing into the left arm. The other was a hard-looking straight-backed chair with a frayed cushion.

A few pots and pans resided on an old gas range and Ruth assumed there would be some dishes in the cabinets. On the other hand, she decided that was a lot to assume considering the condition of this place. Apparently the windows were old enough that they didn't fit the casements as they should. A board approximately two feet long held up the kitchen window and allowed a breeze into the small structure.

"Cozy. I'd like to take a shower."

"It's not the Ritz, but it's a place where you can safely grab a couple of hours' sleep." Emma turned to Moore. "Are her clothes here yet?"

The sound of a car pulling up preempted his reply. Ruth's heart picked up tempo and she waited nervously as Moore peered through the living room blinds. He grunted and turned back to Emma. "That's Phillips now. I'll go get them."

Emma waited until they were alone again to speak. "I know he doesn't say a lot, but Moore is a good man. He just takes some getting used to."

A simple shrug indicated Ruth's lack of interest. Moore returned a few moments later and she heard the car leave. Ruth recognized her dark blue carryall and reached for the bag without thinking. Rather than immediately relinquish the supplies, Moore hesitated long enough for Ruth to get his message. Moore wanted her to know exactly who was in charge and wasn't above using non-verbal intimidation.

"Look, unless you want to go pee in the corner to mark your territory, give it up. I've been through hell tonight and there's nothing you can do to top that."

Ruth didn't wait for his reply. She snatched the bag out of his fingers and asked Emma, "Where's the bathroom?" She couldn't help notice the amused smile on Emma's lips.

"Straight down at the end of the hall. Take your time. No one will bother you."

Looking down at the satchel, Ruth realized she was the only one with a change of clothing. "Where's your stuff?"

"In the car," Emma replied. "Marshals always have a go-bag stashed away for unexpected situations."

With nothing else she could say, Ruth spun on her heel and headed farther into the house. Eavesdropping shamelessly, she heard Emma say, "You really are an ass sometimes, Lyle. How about easing up a little?"

Ruth took the longest, hottest shower of her life. Even then she didn't feel completely clean. She scrubbed until her skin was raw and gave up only when the water ran cold. The entire time,

Ruth played over every interaction with Jordan, searching for the pivotal moment when she said or did anything to reveal her true loyalties. Ruth couldn't find one. Eventually, she realized Jordan had expertly played her. It probably wasn't the first time she got close to someone to keep an eye on them for Carlotti.

All along Ruth had thought she was falling for Jordan, but she had never realized her true nature. Twice, Ruth had trusted without reservation and almost signed her own death warrant. Never again. She resolved to be more suspicious in the future, starting with Emma Blake. Each time she'd let her guard down, it was with someone who went out of their way to be accommodating. Emma fit that bill. Lyle Moore was the only one who openly showed his disdain. When Emma looked at her, Ruth could see the warm concern in her eyes. That expression reminded her of the single kiss they'd shared. After Jordan, Ruth knew she couldn't afford to believe in Emma.

Logic insisted that Ruth should follow Moore's direction over Emma's, but Ruth didn't like him. At this point she wasn't so certain of her logic either. As she reached for a towel, Ruth decided all she could do was keep her eyes open and remain suspicious of everyone. She was too tired to think about it all now anyway. Her brain felt like mush.

Ruth tossed her clothes into the trash bin after removing her items from the pockets. They were ruined anyway and seeing them was a constant reminder of shooting Jordan, something she never wanted to think about again. At least she still had her driver's license, a credit card and a little bit of cash. Ruth had left her purse under the seat of the Jaguar, but removed items she'd need while at the club. She was grateful for that foresight now.

She delved into the carryall to discover that whoever Phillips was, he'd thoughtfully packed a change of clothes, pajamas, shoes and socks. He'd even included her toothbrush, toothpaste and a hairbrush. The simple gesture was enough to start her tears again.

"Enough," she said gruffly, speaking in undertone so as not to be overheard. "No more tears. You had to do it and you'd better toughen up or you're never going to get through this."

Ruth sniffled and dressed. Once finished, she emerged to find Emma leaning against the wall outside the bathroom.

"How are you holding up?"

"I'm fine. Where's Mister Personality?"

"Lyle? He's outside walking the perimeter and smoking. I swear he goes through a pack a day. We called in for some Chinese."

Ruth raised an eyebrow. "You get delivery out here?"

"Actually, we're not that far from the city. It just seems like it because of all the trees. We need to go over some things. Why don't you have a seat in the living room so we can talk."

It wasn't a question and explained why Moore was really outside. Apparently Emma wanted to speak with Ruth alone. Here it comes, Ruth thought as she followed Emma's request. Ruth chose the battered recliner so that Emma couldn't sit directly beside her. It wasn't much, but was the first step in her plan to institute distance from others. Emma settled on the corner of the sofa as near to Ruth as she could get. Somehow, Ruth didn't think this was good news.

"I made some calls while you were in the shower and had a team pull Carlotti out of bed. He's being held downtown on attempted murder charges."

"But you don't have any proof," Ruth pointed out. "You said you need forensic evidence."

"I said we need forensic evidence or your testimony." Emma paused long enough for that information to sink in. "Carlotti will be arraigned in court on Monday morning. At that time, we're going to ask that he be held without bail while waiting for trial."

“Do you think a judge will do that?”

Emma nodded slowly. “It’s possible if we can show that he’s a flight risk. Carlotti has enough money that he could charter a plane to anywhere in the world.”

“You don’t sound very sure.”

Ruth felt her hands shake and grabbed her knees to keep the tremors from showing. She didn’t have to be told that Franco Carlotti was a very powerful man. He probably had friends in high places.

“It depends on who’s sitting on the bench on Monday morning. Some judges are pretty lenient and Carlotti can always claim that he’s a pillar of the community.”

“Hah, that’s a laugh.” The bitterness in the statement almost surprised Ruth. She didn’t like the changes in her personality, but maybe it was a good thing considering the circumstances.

“He’s never been convicted of anything and he owns a very lucrative business. As bad as that sounds, I really don’t think this is going to go in his favor. Most of the L.A. judiciary knows that’s just a cover and attempted murder charges are very serious. Add two bodies to that with known ties to Carlotti and I think we have a fighting chance.”

Ruth braced herself for the answer to her next question. “What time on Monday?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“What?”

Emma quickly held up a hand. “There are only two people with that information outside the courthouse and the marshals who spoke with the judge. That’s me and Lyle. We can’t take a chance on that information leaking out.”

“Who am I going to tell? An aunt that lives in Wyoming whom I haven’t spoken to in years?”

“Sorry, that’s not the point. This is for your safety. I’m afraid that is the way it has to be. If Carlotti’s people find out what’s happening they might try something.”

“Something? You mean they might help him escape?”

Emma leaned over and took one of Ruth’s hands. Ruth wanted to resist, but her skin felt so cold and Emma was so warm. She knew the cold was generated by fear and felt ashamed by the weakness, but not enough to relinquish the contact.

“I won’t lie to you. Someone could take a shot at you. With you out of the picture, that’s one less witness to testify. The good news is that you won’t be alone. We’ve never had enough to arrest Carlotti before, but now that we do we’re going to bring all federal charges against him and that means all witnesses will be there.”

Ruth blinked in comprehension and suddenly saw a light at the end of the tunnel. “The first guy, the one in witness protection? He’ll be there?”

“Yes. Our court system requires that all suspects have the right to face their accusers.”

“What’s he going to testify about? Carlotti didn’t try to kill him too, did he?”

Ruth didn’t really expect Emma to answer and wasn’t surprised when she hesitated. Emma released her hand and stood up, pacing away for a short distance. When she turned around, Ruth could see she had made a decision. Emma squatted down in front of her, close enough that Ruth noticed the small band of color around her pupils.

“He’s testifying against Carlotti for racketeering and drug running. Unfortunately, his word alone isn’t enough, which is why we haven’t gone forward with this before.”

“So he has some kind of proof then?”

Emma nodded. “He says he has a book that he took from Carlotti’s office. It has names, numbers and everything we need for a conviction.”

“If you have the book, why do you need me?” Ruth almost shouted the question in her excitement to escape this nightmare.

“He has it hidden and refuses to tell us where until Carlotti actually goes to court.”

“Damn,” Ruth muttered. “It’s the chicken and the egg. He won’t cough up the book until Carlotti goes to court, but Carlotti couldn’t be arrested without proof.”

“Now you see our problem. We had to get him on a separate charge as an excuse to go to court.”

“Then why the hell didn’t you arrest him for jaywalking or illegal parking?” Ruth shouted. She felt used. Emma had been planning to draw Carlotti in by dangling Ruth as bait all along. That’s why she had approached Ruth at the hospital.

“He’s too careful for that.”

Ruth was too angry to say anything further and Emma finally gave up. She didn’t leave the room, but did move farther away and switch on the television. Moore returned a few minutes later and their food arrived shortly thereafter. Ruth remained silent throughout the meal, forcing herself to eat to keep up her strength. After that, she retired to a small room with a twin bed. Emma took up residence in a corner chair, informing Ruth that she and Moore would take turns watching over her while she slept.

Despite the assurance that the agents would switch off guard duty, Emma was there each time Ruth awakened with a nightmare. She would hold Ruth until she quieted and went back to sleep. Emma never complained, uttering comforting assurances before returning to the chair.

The balance of the weekend passed slowly. Emma and Moore played card games while Ruth mostly slept or watched television. Ruth kept her thoughts to herself, fueling her anger at Emma and honing wariness. The effort to remain more vigilant and distrustful left her feeling wrung out and exhausted by the time Monday morning rolled around.

Chapter Fifteen

“DO WHAT YOU’RE told without any questions asked and we’ll get along just fine.”

Marshal Moore growled at Ruth as he raised his right foot and rested it on the low coffee table. He lifted his pant leg and casually removed a small handgun from an ankle holster. Ruth was tempted to salute the overbearing asshole as he did a quick check and returned the pistol to its resting place. After he’d removed his foot from the furniture, Moore took another weapon from inside his jacket. Ruth assumed he wore a shoulder holster.

“Have I missed something? Are we going into a shootout?”

Moore drew back the slide on the black pistol and chambered a round. “I just believe in being prepared.”

Leaving Moore to his preparations, Ruth sat down on the sofa. She wore a brand new pantsuit some nameless lackey had delivered while she still slept. The burnt orange blazer was a little tight and Ruth thought it made her stick out like a bull’s eye. She reached back to push the tag away from where it irritated her neck. The blazer didn’t really seem to match the tan slacks or brown shoes. At least they were a change from wearing the same clothes for the last two days. She’d be really happy when she could go back home. If there was a sunny side to this situation it was that she’d be free to do exactly that after her court appearance.

“Where’s Emma?”

“Marshal Blake is taking one last check outside before we move. Make sure you’re ready when she comes back in. It’ll be too late to go to the bathroom once she returns.”

There was no point in attempting to put Moore in his place. Ruth had tried it a couple of times in the last few days, but he didn’t seem interested in her opinion. Emma provided a welcome distraction when she came in the front door a few moments later. She glanced first at Marshal Moore before she looked across at Ruth. Her expression warmed and reminded Ruth of the interest Emma still obviously had in her. She’d seen glimpses of it from time to time during the weekend, but thankfully Emma remained strictly professional.

“Time to go.”

“Just the three of us? Shouldn’t we have an escort of some kind?”

Emma shook her head. “We’ll attract less attention this way.”

“What about the other witness?”

“He has his own protection team. They’ll meet us at the courthouse.”

Suddenly, Ruth had her doubts about all of this. “How do you know this book he talked about is real? What if your witness made it up?”

“Are you stalling?” Moore asked, eyes narrowing in anger. “It figures. Just when we’re going to get this babysitting detail over with, she gets cold feet.”

Emma looked confused. “What’s this about, Ruth?”

“Just answer my questions. You seem to be taking a lot on faith considering that your source is a killer for hire.”

“Of all the...”

Emma cut Moore off by placing her hand on his arm. “Fine, clearly we’re not going anywhere until I explain this. Crime bosses are basically businessmen except they deal in illegal merchandise. Like most, Carlotti has accountants that keep the public books we can check at any time. There has to be another ledger he uses to keep track of other not so legitimate enterprises. There is definitely a book.”

“Can we go now?” Moore asked impatiently. “We’re going to be late.”

Ruth stood and headed for the door. Now that the moment was at hand, she was suddenly nervous. This safe house wasn’t much, but the idea of leaving the sanctuary terrified her. Ruth flinched slightly as she ducked through the door, almost expecting an attack. Moore chuckled at her obvious discomfort and Ruth felt her cheeks go warm.

“Stop it, Lyle. I’ve had just about enough,” Emma warned him.

“What?”

He didn’t wait for a response as he headed to the car and slipped behind the wheel. Ruth frowned, noticing that their vehicle had changed. She and Emma had arrived in a dark colored Lincoln. This was a beat-up white Ford sedan with flaky paint and mismatched tires. It belched black smoke when Moore started the engine. They must have switched the vehicles when they brought her clothes in.

“We’re going in that?”

“It’ll get us there,” Emma responded with a hint of amusement.

“I’m glad my will is up to date.”

The cramped backseat smelled like stale hamburgers and beer. Ruth tucked into the corner and tried not to touch anything. Moore roared out onto the gravel road like he was in a hurry and Ruth belatedly snapped her seatbelt. It took less than fifteen minutes to reach downtown Los Angeles and Ruth realized Emma had been truthful when she said they weren’t that far from the city. At a quarter to ten, Moore negotiated the turn into the alley behind the courthouse. During the short ride, Ruth had kept looking behind them but hadn’t noticed anyone following.

High rise office buildings crowded close on the other side of the alley, but there weren’t any other cars. Large metal dumpsters and heaps of garbage seemed to be their only companions. Ruth had expected the others to already be present.

“Where are they?”

“Don’t worry,” Moore said, not quite as snarky as usual. “They’ll be here.”

He parked directly behind the rear steps to the judicial building, but didn’t shut off the engine. Ruth disengaged her seatbelt, noticing Moore’s nervous tapping on the steering wheel. A few minutes later, she spotted a vehicle turn down the opposite side of the alley. Sunlight glinted off the pristine blue paint of an Escalade.

“I guess they didn’t get the memo about not standing out.”

Both Emma and Moore ignored Ruth’s comment as they exited the vehicle. Ruth trailed along behind, hoping the stench from inside the car didn’t cling to her clothes. The smell in the alley wasn’t any better. It reminded Ruth of stale urine. After joining the other two at the base of the stairs, Ruth brushed a piece of lint from her shoulder. She wasn’t really paying attention to the second car. She heard it stop and listened as three doors slammed closed.

“Nice, Moore. Where’d you find that thing, in a junk heap?”

“Shut up, Harrington. I hope you’re ready for this, Snake. You better not be jerking us around.”

Ruth was somehow pleased that she wasn’t the only one Moore treated with such hostility. She checked out the newcomers. At first glance, the three men all resembled U.S. Marshals.

Each wore three-piece suits, but the disgruntled look on the tall, slender blond's face identified him as the original speaker. He must be Harrington. A shorter, dumpy man with a large bald spot seemed to find humor in the situation. Ruth didn't believe he was this "Snake."

Options narrowed down to one, Ruth assessed the third man bringing up the rear. He didn't fit her image of a cold-blooded killer. Clean shaven with curly brown hair and blue eyes, Snake seemed to be the epitome of a well-dressed, well-mannered man. That picture changed when she looked into his eyes. They were cold, showing little expression. She could see tattoos on the backs of his knuckles. His eyes passed over her and moved on, uninterested as he noted all the players.

"Why do they call you Snake?" Ruth wasn't sure what made her ask and evidently she wasn't the only one. His gaze returned to her and Ruth had his full attention. He didn't look pleased and she was sorry she'd asked.

"My last name is Adder, or at least it used to be." The comment was enough to drive home his participation in Witness Protection.

"That's enough chit-chat," Moore interrupted.

While she wasn't looking, he'd climbed the stairs to the back door. His hand hovered near a cipher pad. Ruth wondered if marshals routinely had the code to enter the rear of a courthouse. That didn't really make sense to her, unless it was part of this pre-arranged plan. Someone could always change the code later, but that seemed like a lot of work to arraign one man.

"He's right," Emma said in a tone clearly designed to soothe ruffled feathers. "We should go."

The group started toward the building. Emma was in the lead. As soon as her foot touched the first step, an explosion reverberated through the alley. Ruth flinched and instinctively raised her hands to cover her head. The others around her dove for cover.

"Ambush!" Moore yelled.

After that, Ruth lost track of the others save for Emma. Emma grabbed her by the sleeve and pulled Ruth behind the metal dumpster. In reality, the explosion was a gunshot. A rain of bullets hailed down as Ruth cowered behind the box. She screamed when one of them bounced off the edge of the dumpster a few inches from her face. Emma wrapped an arm around Ruth and pulled her farther into the shadows.

"Stay here."

Emma traded places with her and Ruth saw the gun in her hand. She looked up and all around the alley before shouting. "Anyone see the shooter?"

No one responded.

"Damn it." She turned to Ruth. "You'll be safe here."

"Where are you going?"

"I have to make sure the other witness is safe."

She was gone before Ruth could tell her she was out of her mind. All she could do was huddle between the dumpster and the concrete wall. While Ruth was terrified she'd be shot, she was more worried for Emma. She scooted to the edge of the trash container and peered around the edge. Emma had dashed over to crouch behind the dilapidated Ford near the front tire. Harrington lay unmoving on his back in the alley, but Ruth couldn't see an injury from her vantage point. The other marshal and Snake were pinned behind their vehicle. Moore was nowhere in sight. The windows were blown out of both cars and they were full of bullet holes.

Ruth watched helplessly as Emma kept trying to get to Harrington, but the gunfire was too intense. "Delaney, cover me!"

Ruth gasped as the marshal stood unexpectedly and fired upward at the building across the alley. In the brief respite that followed, Emma dashed away from the car and grabbed Harrington under the shoulders. She pulled him toward safety, but his weight kept Emma from moving very fast. Ruth's concern for Emma overrode her common sense. She ran toward Emma and the downed marshal, taking an arm to help pull him behind the vehicle.

"Snake, stop!"

Ruth turned to see Snake heading directly toward her. Surprise kept her kneeling beside the Ford, but Snake wasn't trying to get to Ruth. He kept going, seeming intent on reaching the more fortified position behind the dumpster. Before he could reach his goal, a burst of automatic fire made his body jump like a puppet on a string. Snake stopped running and fell face down into a pile of trash. He was less than a foot away and Ruth thought she saw him moving.

She couldn't let him die. Snake was the only one who could ensure she didn't forfeit life as she knew it. The Feds needed the ledger and he alone had the knowledge to its whereabouts. Fear forgotten, Ruth crouched and ran to him. She heard Emma call her name, but this was more important. Ruth struggled to turn Snake onto his back. Her exposure to death limited, Ruth could still see the impending signs.

"No, you can't die. You have to tell them where the book is."

Snake tried to speak, but with all the gunshots echoing down the alley, Ruth couldn't hear his words. The wail of police sirens on approach added to the cacophony. She leaned closer and started when Snake grabbed her lapel with a bloody hand. He pulled her to him.

"Under...his desk. Safe," Snake whispered into her ear.

"It's safe under Carlotti's desk?" That didn't make sense.

Snake shook his head and tried again. "A safe...under..."

Clarity hit like a lightning bolt. "The ledger is in a safe under his desk?"

His eyes closed and Ruth felt Snake's grasp slacken. There was nothing more she could do for him. Ruth turned around as Moore sprinted from concealment behind the concrete courthouse steps. He was headed toward the car, but Ruth didn't hear any more shooting. Emma pulled her to her feet and pushed Ruth after Moore. She appeared to be limping.

"What happened?"

"Delaney got the shooter, but there will be more on the way. We have to get out of here."

Back in the Ford, Moore floored it and tore out of the alley. Ruth noticed that Delaney stayed behind with Snake and the wounded Marshal Harrington. "What about them?"

"Snake's already dead and the marshals aren't the target. Delaney will make sure Harrington gets taken care of."

Aren't the target. The words echoed in her ears. Ruth's mouth went dry and adrenaline surged again making her hands tremble as she attempted to fasten the seatbelt. They hit the end of the alley and horns blared as Moore sped into oncoming traffic. He slammed the brakes on and pulled the car hard to the left. Ruth struck her head against the door and it took a second for her vision to clear. She could hear the squeal of brakes as other drivers reacted and braced herself for the crash that never came. As they accelerated down the roadway, Ruth looked up through the windshield just in time to see Moore blow through a red traffic light.

"Are you trying to get us killed?"

"Ask him that," Moore shot back. Ruth noticed his eyes pinned to the rearview mirror. She glanced back, afraid of what she would find. A red Ninja motorcycle was in hot pursuit. The driver wore a black helmet with an equally dark full-face visor.

“Well this is a monster cluster-fuck of epic proportions,” Emma said. “Ruth, get down in the floorboard, now! No matter what, we keep her safe, right?”

When Moore didn't respond, Emma prompted him. “Right?”

“Do you mind if we just get there in one piece?”

Less than reassured with his waspish reply, Ruth nevertheless dove into the floorboard. The tight squeeze between the seats reassured her that they'd hold her safely in place as Moore wove between moving cars. Before she could take comfort from that idea, more automatic weapons fire slammed through the automobile. Windows shattered and someone shrieked in pain. Ruth thought it was Emma, but that didn't prevent the marshal from returning fire. Ruth identified the sound of the semi-automatic pistol from the loud boom inside the car.

The vehicle swung abruptly to the right before returning to the original path and Ruth held onto the front seat. She clamped her teeth closed to keep from throwing up on the floor from the unpredictable maneuvering.

“There he goes,” Moore said in triumph. The gunfire ceased without warning.

“Great job, Lyle.”

Ruth stuck her head up and tentatively looked around. The motorcyclist lay sprawled in the middle of a construction zone. From what she could tell at a quick glance, Moore had side-swiped the assassin and rammed him into a barricade. No one else seemed to be in pursuit.

“Is everyone okay?” Ruth asked. She peered over the seats to check without awaiting a reply. Moore didn't appear injured. Emma nodded, but her paleness belied the truth.

“Emma, are you hit?” Moore demanded.

“I'm fine. What the hell was that? How did they know where we'd be?”

Moore shook his head, but even Ruth knew the answer. Someone had leaked the information. Snake, a.k.a. Adder, seemed the obvious choice, but she couldn't understand what he would gain by such an action.

“Where are we going?”

Emma glanced back at her and then at her partner. “Lyle?”

“Back to the safe house.”

“Is that such a good idea? If we do have an informant in our ranks, Carlotti's people will know about the safe house.”

“We don't have a choice. We need to regroup and bind your wounds. There'll be enough time for that before we bug out.”

Ruth could see the indecision on Emma's face, but after a moment she finally nodded in agreement. “All right, but you should slow down now. We don't want to draw any more attention to ourselves.”

When Moore complied and stopped driving like a maniac, Ruth let out a sigh of relief. She was still worried about Emma, but at least she was fully aware and no one was currently shooting at them. Soon, the familiar confines of the safe house came into view. Ruth bailed out of the car as soon as it stopped. They didn't have much time and she didn't intend to be packing her toothbrush when Carlotti's people rolled up in the front yard.

She opened Emma's door and gasped in dismay. A large pool of blood saturated Emma's blouse on the right side of her abdomen. Ruth slipped an arm around Emma's waist as she stumbled from the car.

“Let me help you.”

Emma didn't argue. She leaned heavily on Ruth's shoulders as they walked to the porch. Moore lingered behind and Ruth looked back over her shoulder to see what he was doing. He stood between the Ford's open door and the seat, holding a cell phone to his lips.

"What's he doing?" she asked as they climbed the steps.

"Checking in, probably calling for reinforcements."

"Is that safe? We don't know who we can trust."

Ruth held Emma up as she opened the door. Once inside, she assisted Emma onto the sofa.

"It'll be fine. I'm sure he's talking to our director."

"Okay. Is there a first-aid kit around here somewhere?" Ruth stood up just as Moore entered the house. He was quiet as he closed and locked the door.

"Look in the bathroom under the cabinet," Emma responded. She still held the gun in her hand and Ruth noticed how her grasp trembled.

"Don't bother," Moore said. "You won't need it."

"What the hell do you mean? She's bleeding all over..." Ruth suddenly realized Moore was pointing his gun at them. "Dear God, is there no one we can trust?"

"You can trust that I will shoot you if you move."

Emma stood slowly and Ruth held her breath as the gun moved toward her. Ruth noticed that she kept her own weapon at her side, but Emma's finger was on the trigger. Emma stood up straight, putting on a brave face.

"You were the leak," Ruth said. "That explains why you hid out behind the steps while everyone else shot back."

"How much is Carlotti paying you, Lyle?"

"A hell of a lot."

"So now what, you're just going to kill us?"

Emma sounded calm and Ruth envied her. No matter how many times she'd been in this situation lately, Ruth was just as terrified as that first moment on the cliffside. She took comfort in the fact that Emma was slowly inching closer to her former partner. She hoped Emma had a clear plan in mind because she'd already been shot once. Ruth desperately wished she had a weapon of her own. Remembering the wooden bar that held up the kitchen window, Ruth glanced toward it. She was a considerable distance away. Moore would shoot her long before she reached it.

"Not my style, but I will if I have to," Lyle replied. "Why don't you sit back down and we'll just wait for a while."

Emma made a noise of disbelief. "You called Carlotti."

"Yes, through his attorney, and his men will be here soon to make this all go away."

Ruth tried to think of some way to help Emma. She needed to provide a distraction so Emma could save their lives. Too bad Ruth wasn't some kind of black belt. All she had was her wits. She just started talking, saying anything she could to make Moore pay attention to her.

"Why don't you just shoot us yourself? Or are you too much of a coward?"

Moore's face reddened and he swung the pistol toward her. "You are such a pain in the ass. Why couldn't you have just died in that alley? Then all of this would be over and I wouldn't have to kill my partner."

"Some partner," Ruth threw back at him, taking a step away from Emma and toward the kitchen. She was pleased that Moore followed her movement. "I should have known the minute I saw you. You never wanted to be here, never wanted to protect me. You were just waiting for the chance to take me out. Why should I believe that you'd hesitate for an instant to kill Emma?"

Enraged, Moore extended his service weapon toward her and Ruth dove onto the kitchen floor. She cried out at the burning pain in her thigh. At the same time, a shot rang out from behind her. She thought Moore had shot her until she spotted his body lying on the living room rug. As she watched, Emma kicked the gun out of his hand.

“Are you all right?”

Ruth stood up slowly, testing the strength in her leg. “I’m fine. It’s an old injury. What about you?”

Anguish ghosted over Emma’s face as she briefly considered Moore. When she looked up, the emotion had disappeared and she was all business. “We need to get out of here before Carlotti’s men show up.”

Ruth rushed over to Emma and offered her an arm. Emma refused and told Ruth to collect Moore’s weapon. Depending on what happened, they might need it. She complied quickly, remembering to take the small pistol from his ankle holster. Ruth didn’t relish touching his dead body, but recognized the necessity. Once finished, she grabbed her bag and shoved her belongings inside. At the last second, Ruth remembered to go to the room Emma and Moore had switched off using. She had to check both go-bags she discovered on opposite sides of the bed to determine which one belonged to Emma. Once she’d located the correct bag, a brown rucksack, Ruth took time to find and stash all of Emma’s things before she hustled back out to the front.

Emma was waiting beside the front door once Ruth finished. She pushed away clumsily from the wall and Ruth noticed the smear of blood she left on the sheetrock. Only then did Ruth remember that Emma had been limping earlier. Wearing dark slacks, it was difficult to tell for certain but Ruth thought a bullet must have grazed Emma’s leg during the alley shootout.

“I’m driving,” Ruth announced.

Ruth gripped Emma’s arm and hustled her to the car. She tossed her bag into the backseat and slid behind the wheel. Emma pulled her door shut with difficulty. Ruth could hear her panting from the effort. She struggled not to fuss over Emma’s condition as she drove away from the house and back toward the city.

“I don’t suppose we can stop by my house for some supplies?”

“No,” Emma answered quickly. “We can’t go back to my office either. There’s no telling who else is involved in this. Head east. Once we get out of Los Angeles, I’ll give you directions to another place I know of.”

“Another safe house? Emma, you need a hospital.”

“A hospital won’t do me any good if I’m dead. Please, Ruth, I know you’re worried about me and I appreciate it. I promise to take care of myself once we get where we’re going.”

When Ruth looked into Emma’s eyes, she couldn’t deny her. Ruth’s track record hadn’t been good in the trust department lately, but Emma had taken a bullet for her. In her book that went a long way for generating loyalty.

“What are we going to do for money? We’re going to need supplies.”

“How much cash do you have on you?”

Ruth kept one hand on the wheel while she dug into her front pocket with the other. “I have about two hundred dollars...and my credit card.”

“No cards, they’ll be able to trace us. I’ve got some money, too. It’ll be enough for a few days, but we’re going to need another car. They’ll know what this one looks like.”

Ruth considered going by the golf course to pick up the Jaguar, but quickly realized that wouldn’t work either. “What do you recommend?”

“Head to the mall.”

Unable to imagine why Emma wanted to go shopping at a time like this, Ruth nevertheless obeyed. Twenty minutes later, she drove into the South Coast Plaza parking lot. By far one of L.A.'s largest shopping malls, the structure covered over one hundred twenty-eight acres. Ruth instinctively stayed away from the outdoor areas and toward the rear of the parking lot. As she checked to make sure no one stood nearby, she noticed a tour bus across the way at the main entrance.

"Over there." Emma sounded tired and her hand trembled as she pointed to an old beat up truck.

Ruth complied, stopping beside the clunker. To her surprise, Emma opened her door and headed for the pickup. Over her shoulder, Emma said, "Grab our things."

The knowledge of what they were about to do hit her and Ruth furtively ensured no one stood near enough to raise an alarm. She didn't know how Emma did it, but before Ruth had time to collect their bags the deed was done. Emma had opened the truck's presumably locked door and hot-wired the engine.

Emma met her eyes. "I don't like it either, but there might be a tracking device on the Ford."

"I understand. Carlotti probably has a pretty good description of it anyway."

After tossing their bags into the bed, Ruth walked over to the driver's side. Emma had already sat down and prepared to close the door, but Ruth stopped her. "No way. I'm driving. You're hurt and you'll fall asleep. I don't intend to be in a major crash."

"Fine, whatever."

Seconds later, they were on their way. Ruth pulled onto Bristol Street headed toward the 405 freeway. After only a few seconds, she realized they had a problem. The pickup had barely a quarter of a tank of gas.

"Damn it. We just can't get a break. We need to stop for gas."

Emma didn't reply and Ruth discovered she was already asleep or unconscious. Several attempts to awaken Emma proved useless and Ruth felt panic eating away at the edges of her control. She took several deep breaths, realizing they didn't have time for her to freak out. Both of their lives depended upon what she would do next.

Okay, they needed gas and then to get out of the city. She could do that. Emma had told her to head east, but hadn't given any clear direction after that. It was up to Ruth to choose their destination until Emma woke up. She prayed that Emma was merely sleeping and recovering her strength.

The 405 traveled roughly north/south, but Ruth could make it to I80 East in about an hour. Depending on traffic. She prayed they had enough time for that. Carlotti's men couldn't be that far behind them and he had the resources to use corrupt police officers and others she would never dream of.

That idea almost caused her to panic again, so Ruth pushed thoughts of Carlotti away to focus on immediate needs. She stopped at a Gas-n-Go and pulled up to the nearest pump before she realized she had another decision to make. Emma had told her not to use a credit card because it could be traced, but they needed to hold onto whatever cash they had. Ruth decided to use her card here because Carlotti already knew they were in the city. She could fill up and be gone before anyone ever made a computer trace. He would never find her after they left L.A.

Chapter Sixteen

THE LITTLE CHEVY barely had enough horsepower to make it up the incline. Ruth had figured out pretty fast that it wasn't exactly designed for mountain terrain, but as long as the truck held out long enough for them to make it to her aunt's house she would be happy. The night had been long, especially since Emma slept the whole time and their stolen vehicle didn't have a radio. Ruth finally resorted to rolling down the window in the hopes that the chilly air blowing into the cab would keep her awake. Dawn had come and gone and her eyes felt like someone had poured sand into them.

At least the truck got pretty good gas mileage. Ruth had only stopped twice to refuel, but would need to do so again shortly. She hated it, but she needed a bathroom break, more gas and something to eat. Emma interrupted Ruth's thoughts by making a groaning sound. Seconds later, her eyes opened and she slowly sat up. Emma gazed at Ruth with a soft expression that made her stomach flip. Then Emma blinked and seemed to wake up more fully.

"Where are we?" She rubbed at her eyes with the heel of her hand before looking around.

"About an hour from Laramie. You've been asleep for about fourteen hours. How are you feeling?"

"Laramie? As in Wyoming? What in God's name are we doing here?"

Relieved to hear the fire back in Emma's voice, Ruth grinned and said. "Well, it's not like you were in any condition to give directions so I headed to the only place I could think of. My aunt lives in Laramie."

"Perfect. I guess it's as good a place as any and I doubt anyone will be expecting this."

"Are you hungry?"

"Starving and I could really use a bathroom break."

"That's good news," Ruth said. "If you're hungry, you must not be hurt too badly. I was really worried about you."

"You're sweet, but I think they're just flesh wounds," Emma pulled up the hem of her shirt, but the seatbelt seemed to be in the way. "Is there anywhere we can stop?"

"Yes, I was about to anyway. There's an exit coming up in a couple of miles where we can get you cleaned up and get something to eat. I'd kill for a cup of coffee right now."

Uttered without thought, the casual remark forced Ruth to think of Jordan. Her heart sank as she remembered their final encounter and it would be so easy to sink into a well of despair. For the first time in her life, Ruth refused to dwell on past recriminations. Emma was right when she said Ruth hadn't a choice in her actions. She didn't have to like how things turned out, but she was through beating herself up. Jordan had made her own choices that led to that particular outcome.

Ruth took the next exit. She went into a local Walmart to purchase a change of clothes for Emma and a first-aid kit. A quick run via a drive-through after that provided breakfast and coffee. Ruth kept a close eye on her dwindling funds as she finished up their chores by topping off the gas tank. She waited until they were back on the road to eat anything.

“What’s your aunt’s place like?”

Before answering, Ruth sipped at her coffee. She felt almost human again when the warmth hit her stomach. “It’s small, only a house and one acre on this side of town. She lives alone and only has one close neighbor. My aunt’s told me that he’s a bit of a busybody, but pretty much stays to himself. We won’t have to worry about anyone spotting us.”

“That’s good. Do you think she’d let me use her phone? It’s long distance, but I can reverse the charges. I need to contact my boss.”

“I take it there’s some reason you can’t use your cell. Sorry, I’m not very good at this spy stuff.”

“Actually, I turned my phone off and removed the battery as soon as we left the safe house. Anyone with the proper clearance could turn it back on by remote and activate the GPS.”

“Oh no, can they do that with mine?” Ruth pulled the cell phone along with the case off of her waistband and handed the device to Emma.

Rather than respond, Emma disabled Ruth’s phone. She returned it and then stared out the window at the passing terrain. They had just begun their descent from Elk Mountain toward Laramie. Ruth noticed how worried Emma seemed and couldn’t imagine what she was thinking about. With her experience as a U.S. Marshal, Emma clearly had a much clearer picture of exactly how much trouble they were in. It was hard enough just for Ruth to get them out of Los Angeles and she hoped Emma kept the more disturbing details to herself.

They finished the ride in silence. Something Ruth couldn’t put her finger on nagged at the back of her mind. She felt sure she had screwed up their escape somehow, but couldn’t imagine when. Ruth remembered at the last second to take the exit toward her aunt’s home. The journey came to a halt at the end of a white rock road. Ruth let out a relieved sigh as she pulled into a paved driveway. It had been years since she’d been here, but nothing seemed to have changed.

The brick ranch-style house still had the same white shutters bracing the windows and the yard was perfectly manicured. Colorful flowers lined a stone walkway from the driveway to the front porch. At first, the silence led Ruth to think no one was home. Then a dour-faced woman in her late sixties stepped halfway through the screen door.

Ruth noticed that Terry’s hair was still jet black and assumed the color was artificial.

“Stay here. I’ll explain things.”

“Why can’t I come with you?”

“Are you serious?” Ruth asked incredulously. “Have you looked down at your clothes lately?”

While she’d bought Emma some new clothes, there hadn’t yet been a chance for her to change. Ruth could imagine her aunt’s reaction to seeing all that blood.

“I’ll stay here.”

“Good choice.”

As soon as she left the car, Ruth saw Terry’s expression turn from questioning to delighted. A huge smile creased her face and she came halfway down the steps to throw her arms around Ruth’s neck.

“What in the world brings you out here, Ruth?”

Ruth returned the hug, surprised to find tears stinging her eyes. “Can’t I just visit family?”

“Ha, I’m old, but I’m not stupid.” Terry pushed back, but kept hold of Ruth’s arms. “Since when do you drive an old rattle-trap like that? And who’s your friend?”

Leave it to Terry to drive straight to the heart of the matter. Her demeanor reminded Ruth so much of her mother. She swallowed hard and decided to cut to the chase. Emma's injuries still needed treated and Ruth had heard gunshot wounds were easily infected.

"We're in trouble. We need a place to stay, but you can't tell anyone that we're here. No one, Aunt Terry."

The smile left Terry's face and she released her hold on Ruth. "What's this about?"

"I promise to tell you everything, but right now I have to help Emma. She's been hurt."

The alteration of Terry's demeanor was startling. She became all business and took charge without hesitation, leading the way toward the car. "Why in the world didn't you say so? I'll help your friend while you get your things. Meet me in the guestroom."

Ruth felt a little jealous that she hadn't responded to their situation with the same calm resolve as her aunt. Instead, Ruth was terrified much of the time and indecisive in a moment of crisis. She knew Terry would have a lot of questions, but at the moment she was happy to let someone else make the decisions. Ruth retrieved both of their carryalls as well as the Walmart bags. Terry already had Emma out of the car with one arm braced around her waist as she assisted her into the house. Despite Emma's reassurances that her injuries were only "flesh wounds." Ruth noticed how heavily she leaned on Terry as they climbed the steps.

Noticing very little about the home's décor, Ruth followed the duo into the downstairs guestroom. She vaguely remembered the gold metal headboard on the queen bed from years ago. Pillows were piled at the head of the bed atop of what appeared to be a homemade patchwork quilt. Ruth placed their belongings against a wall while Terry helped Emma to the bed.

"I'm fine, really. They're only scratches."

Terry harrumphed loudly. "With all that blood, I'd say it's more than a scratch. Ruth, go fill the tub. Make sure the water isn't too hot." Then to Emma, "Do you need help getting those things off? You'll need to scrub those wounds good."

A door in the corner of the room led to a small bathroom. Ruth crossed the room toward it, but kept a careful eye on her aunt. She was concerned how Terry would react if she discovered Emma's wounds were caused by gunfire. Sure enough, as soon as Emma started to remove her jacket, Terry spotted the gun in the shoulder holster. Her eyes went wide and her jaw tightened. Ruth waited for an explosion of questions.

"Let me have that gun."

Pale blue eyes darted toward Ruth before Emma spoke to Terry. "I don't think you understand. I'm not a criminal."

"Honey, I may be old, but I'm not stupid. You have nothing to worry about. Fine, just leave it on the nightstand. I promise you, it'll be here when you come out of the bath...unless you'd like to take it in with you."

Terry looked offended, but she didn't sound angry. Ruth took comfort from that and realized her aunt was made of stronger stuff than she'd given her credit for.

"Don't you find this shocking?" Ruth asked, attempting to ensure Terry was truly okay with the situation. She didn't know what she'd do if that turned out not to be the case. They had nowhere else to go.

Stepping closer to Emma in what she admitted was a protective gesture, Ruth placed a hand on her shoulder. Emma started slightly, highlighting the fact that Ruth had never instigated any contact between them. Considering what they'd been through together, it was only natural that Ruth would warm up to her.

Terry shrugged with one shoulder. "I recognize a female police officer when I see one. I'm assuming those are bullet wounds you're carrying around?"

"I'm a U.S. Marshal actually, Emma Blake. And yes ma'am, they're from gunshots."

"Well, we'll get you all taken care of. Ruth's Uncle Dean was in Vietnam so I know how to treat you and keep those injuries from getting infected." Without waiting for a response, Terry turned to Ruth. "How long are you staying?"

"Uh, I'm not sure really. I didn't know where else to go. A few days?"

"Right, you can fill me in later."

"Can I use your phone?" Emma interrupted.

Ruth could see exhaustion on her face as well as black circles under Emma's eyes. She'd slept for a long time in the car and she already looked like she could use a nap.

"Yes, but that'll have to wait. Right now you need to clean up and get some rest. Ruth will help you and when you're ready, I'll dress your wounds. The two of you can share this room. Sorry, but I don't have a lot of rooms prepared for unexpected company."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Ruth rushed to assure her. "Thank you so much for helping us."

"What, you didn't think I would? You're family. I'll go start dinner."

Terry left the room, waddling slightly from side to side. She wasn't an overly heavy woman, but Ruth remembered she had arthritis in her feet and hips.

"Wow, she's a real dynamo."

"Yeah, I'd forgotten how independent she is. Nothing fazes her."

Emma nodded in appreciation. "I like her."

She began tugging at the hem of her jacket again and Ruth noticed her grimace of pain. Emma had done a good job of concealing her discomfort while Terry was in the room and Ruth felt like an ass for not realizing how much she had to be hurting.

"Here, let me."

As she eased the blazer from Emma's shoulders, Ruth tried to move carefully. The bloodstain on the front of Emma's shirt hadn't grown, leaving her to suspect that the wounds had closed up. The last thing Ruth wanted to do was reopen them. Blood had also soaked into the side of the jacket, leaving the material stiff where it had dried.

"What do you want me to do with this?"

Emma chuckled. "Is there a trash can around? I think these clothes are ruined."

Removing the rest of her garments proved a challenge. The shirt had stuck to Emma's wound and by the time they got it free, the injury began to seep again. The same held true with Emma's trousers. Ruth tried to keep a stoic expression on her face, but the sight of the wounds disturbed her. Emma's skin around the injuries was red and inflamed. Where the bullets had grazed her skin, the wounds reminded Ruth of skid marks on a road. The rounds had cauterized the flesh, blackening it in their wake.

All of Emma's outerwear went into the small waste can Ruth discovered in the corner. The shoulder rig and pistol rested on the nightstand, just as Terry had suggested. When she was down to her underwear, Ruth darted into the bathroom and returned with a towel.

"I'll let you take care of the rest while I run the bathwater. Give a shout when you're ready for me to help you into the bathroom."

Emma grew suddenly impatient. "Ruth, I assure you that I can manage the rest on my own. I'm a big girl and I've made it this far in life without help from you."

The unexpected verbal attack caught Ruth by surprise. She started to get angry, but her ire quickly faded when she noticed Emma's burning cheeks. On the surface of what she said, Ruth

couldn't argue, but there was more to this than a bid for independence. It didn't take long after meeting her to know that Emma Blake was a fiercely self-sufficient woman. Very likely, she had a hard time feeling vulnerable and dependent on another person for her physical welfare. Ruth sympathized with her, but couldn't allow Emma the distance she needed. Their situation had changed and even though safe from an imminent attack, Ruth knew this thing with Carlotti wasn't over. She and Emma had to learn to rely on each other.

Ruth acknowledged the truth of that reality, but was honest enough to admit there was more. She felt like the earth had shifted under her feet in the last few days, although in reality, it had all started several months ago. Having people repeatedly try to kill her left Ruth dangling over a precipice, trying not to fall into hysteria and despair. Emma had become her tether. Her willingness to put her own life on the line to keep Ruth safe had earned her trust, something that didn't come easy these days.

She knelt in front of Emma and placed a hand on her bare knee, ignoring the way she flinched. "I know you can," she said softly. "Truly, I don't think there's anything you can't do. I need to help you, not because I think you're incapable, but because it's my turn to keep you safe."

Emma relaxed and her gaze softened. "I guess I can understand that. Thank you. Now go run the water. You're not seeing me naked without a nice dinner and some candlelight first."

RUTH LEFT EMMA soaking in the tub while she went to help Terry with dinner. Emma promised that she would shout when she was ready for assistance with her wounds. The time alone with Terry was strained. Ruth kept expecting her to ask about the circumstances that brought them to her door, but Terry acted as though there was nothing unusual happening. Terry had known about Ruth's original injuries caused by falling from the cliff, but not the surrounding circumstances. Following Emma's admonition to keep those details and the driving reason behind them to herself was difficult.

Terry leaned a hip against the kitchen counter with a spatula in her hand. She stood a short distance from the stove in preparation of turning the pork chops. The scent of food filled the air, but Ruth couldn't ignore the intensity of Terry's gaze. It appeared Terry was about to ask her some difficult questions.

"Are you going to tell me why you're here?"

Ruth swallowed hard. "I wish I could, but it's safer if you don't know."

"Uh huh, I figured you'd say that. All right, can you at least tell me how Emma got those injuries?"

"She saved my life from...someone."

Terry waited, but there was nothing more forthcoming. "It sounds to me like you're in over your head. Why don't you girls just stay here and not go back to the city?"

Ruth only wished it was that easy. Her aunt lived a simple life and clearly couldn't imagine how people like Carlotti operated. Even Ruth, who was neck-deep in all this mess, wasn't quite sure what to do next. If it weren't for Emma, she would be an easy target for the crime boss.

"I'm afraid that won't work. Besides, we can't just bury our heads in the sand and hope this goes away."

Emma called out for Ruth from the bedroom, temporarily halting the conversation. She offered Terry an apologetic smile and then left the kitchen. Emma sat on the bed in her new tank

top and a pair of grey sweatpants. Her short blond hair was a shade darker from the water and a few droplets trickled down her chest. Ruth watched one of the drops track down between Emma's breasts. Her vision narrowed down to that place as her body reacted to the sight. Despite their circumstances, undeterred by memories of Jordan, Ruth's mouth watered with the desire to taste Emma's softness. The craving lasted only moments before Ruth forced her eyes upward.

With her head down as she checked the wound on her stomach, Emma couldn't see Ruth's expression. Grateful that Emma had missed it, Ruth adopted a cheerful tone.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better. These things don't look so bad with all the dried blood washed off."

"I'll be the judge of that," Ruth joked, crossing the room to peer down at the injuries. The bullet wounds now resembled road rash scrapes, although the one on Emma's stomach still leaked and gaped open around the edges. "They do look better, but I think you're going to need some stitches on that one. I'll get the first-aid kit."

Terry walked into the room without knocking and took over for Ruth. She had overheard the comment about stitches. She gave Emma the choice of going to a hospital or having Terry apply the stitches herself. Ruth wasn't surprised when Emma refused to go to a medical facility. Ruth and Emma remained silent as Terry left the room, advising them she would be right back. When she returned, Terry carried a bottle of rubbing alcohol in addition to the sewing items.

"I'm not going to lie," Terry advised Emma. "This will hurt."

"It's okay. It's not the first time I've had stitches without a local."

Applying skills Ruth assumed she'd acquired with her late husband after the war, Terry set about inserting the stitches into Emma's tender flesh. Ruth couldn't watch. Just the idea of what she was doing threatened to make Ruth ill. Emma didn't make a sound during the procedure, surprising Ruth yet again with the strength she displayed. When Terry finally finished stitching the wound closed, she insisted on applying antibiotic ointment to the other injury and bandaging everything. Ministrations finally complete, Terry urged Emma under the covers. Ruth moved closer to help.

"You stay here, sweetie. I'll bring you a plate," Terry offered.

"Oh please, that's not necessary. I don't want to be a burden."

Terry clucked at Emma and Ruth did her best to hide a smile. "None of that. You're no burden at all. It's been a long time since I've had the chance to take care of someone other than myself."

When they were alone again, Emma asked, "Is she always like this?"

"Be careful or she'll mother you to death. Seriously though, you might as well give up. I know she won't."

"Great."

Although it sounded like a complaint, Ruth didn't think Emma really minded. "I'll bring a phone in here so you can call your boss."

She turned away, but then hesitated. Something had bothered Ruth since they pulled into the driveway. As much as Ruth wanted to put this off, she had to know. "Emma, how much can I tell her? She deserves to know why we're here."

"I'm sorry Ruth, but you can't tell her anything. We don't need to put her in danger too."

"I was afraid you'd say that." Ruth dropped her gaze, unable to meet the sympathy in Emma's eyes.

"I know this is hard because this is probably the last time you'll see her for awhile. Once you go into witness protection, you'll have a new identity and will have to cut all ties to anyone

you've ever known. I'm sure you don't want to hear that, but without Adder, you're the only witness we have."

Unable to imagine never seeing Terry again, Ruth felt like she'd just had the wind knocked out of her. She didn't have much family left and couldn't bear the thought of losing her aunt. Somewhat breathless, she asked, "For how long?"

"At least until after you testify against Carlotti."

An idea occurred to Ruth with the force of a lightning bolt. Perhaps there was another way after all. She had forgotten all about Adder's last words to her.

"I know where the ledger is."

"What? Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"Because we've been a little busy running for our lives," Ruth replied somewhat sarcastically. "I've had other things on my mind."

"Where is it?"

Before Ruth could answer, Terry returned to the room carrying a tray. She walked over and carefully handed her burden to Emma, taking the glass of tea off and setting it on the nightstand so it wouldn't spill.

"We'll talk about it later," Ruth said. Emma was still tired and they could finish their discussion after she had eaten.

Emma fixed her with a grim stare. "You bet we will."

Ruth left Emma to Terry's care and retrieved the phone from the living room. She plugged it into the wall next to the nightstand and left Emma eating her dinner. Ruth didn't want to leave her side long enough to consume her own meal, but needed some space after her previous reaction to Emma's body. Dinner proved a long affair. Terry had outdone herself, cooking pork chops, mashed potatoes and gravy, brussel sprouts and dinner rolls with lots of butter. Their conversation centered around Terry's life taking care of the property and which neighbors she got along with best. By the time it was over, Ruth was having trouble keeping her eyes open.

"You look all in, kid. Why don't you bring me Emma's tray and then get to bed. I can clean up here."

"Are you sure? I don't want to leave you with all the work."

"I'm very sure. Go on now...scoot."

Ruth happily did as she was told. The last thing she wanted to do after a sixteen-hour drive was help clean up the kitchen. She felt a little guilty, but not enough to stick around. She didn't hear anything from the bedroom so she carefully peered around the door jam. Emma was already asleep. She had finished most of her dinner and the tray sat beside her on the bed. Ruth quickly returned it to the kitchen before grabbing her bag and heading into the bathroom.

After a quick rinse and a long scrub of her teeth, Ruth changed into a new pair of pajamas she'd picked up while shopping for Emma. She shut the bedroom door, turned out the overhead lights and navigated to the opposite side of the bed by starlight. Thankfully, she'd be on the side of the bed away from Emma's injuries.

Ruth was a little nervous about crawling into bed with Emma. They didn't have the type of relationship that usually saw two people sharing a bed. She craved sleep, but the warmth of Emma's skin was like a siren song calling out to Ruth. Determined to control her impulses, and convinced she had lost her mind, Ruth climbed between the sheets with her back to Emma. Certain she would never sleep, Ruth focused on the sound of Emma's slow, deep breathing. She found the sound comforting and slowly felt her tension fade.

Chapter Seventeen

MORNING CAME TOO early as far as Ruth was concerned. As her eyes fluttered open, she groaned and closed them against the light streaming in the bedroom window. She attempted to raise her hand to rub her face when she realized she couldn't move. Something had her arm pinned in place. Turning to look, Ruth found herself nose to nose with a still sleeping Emma. She disregarded her trapped arm.

Presented with such an unexpected opportunity, Ruth unabashedly studied her companion's face. Asleep, Emma still carried tiny lines of tension around her lips and eyes. Ruth had never asked her age, but guessed Emma was in her late thirties. Long sandy-blond eyelashes cast half-crescent shadows upon her cheeks. Emma carried a small mole right in the center of her chin that Ruth had never before noticed.

As had happened last night, heat burned a path from her chest straight down to the pit of her stomach. Although she'd only known Emma a few weeks, it felt like so much longer. Surviving random gunmen and going on the run together could do that. Ruth wanted to explain this newly discovered physical attraction so easily, but she couldn't. She didn't have an answer at all. It was simply there.

Lost in contemplation over how quickly things changed, Emma surprised her by opening her eyes. Pale blue appeared almost silver in the morning sunlight. The corners of those amazing eyes crinkled in a soft, sleepy smile. Pupils dilated, Emma rose up slightly. Ruth couldn't move as the distance between them shrank.

"I wish I'd met you before she did."

The whispered words caressed Ruth's lips, clouding her mind. An instant before Emma kissed her, the meaning sank in. The reference to Jordan was like a dash of cold water. Ruth turned her head and pulled away. "I can't. I'm sorry."

Emma released a breath and moved over to her side of the bed. Pins and needles sang through Ruth's arm as the feeling returned, but she was so miserable that she barely noticed. What was wrong with her? Ruth had thought she was falling in love with Jordan...until the woman tried to kill her. Now, here she was with a wounded federal marshal and ready to leap right back into bed, so to speak.

"We should talk," Emma said. "About our situation, I mean."

Ruth was happy to latch onto anything that would create some emotional distance. "You want to know about the ledger? Snake told me it was hidden in a safe under Carlotti's desk."

"Clever. Since we know he has a wall safe in his office, I doubt anyone would suspect a second safe. Unfortunately, I don't know if we'll be able to get to it."

Ruth was getting tired of the cat and mouse. In the movies, the officers received information that led to a search warrant. Why couldn't this be just as easy? She said as much and received a smirk from Emma in response.

"Do you remember that we were all supposed to be present at Carlotti's arraignment yesterday?"

“Of course. I didn’t hit my head or anything.”

A finger chucked Ruth under the chin. She hadn’t expected Emma to have a playful side and the action effectively silenced her.

“Well, guess what? We didn’t make it. Since the prosecutors witnesses didn’t bother to show up, I’m sure Carlotti is out of jail with no charges hanging over his head. In a nutshell, he’s at home. As for a warrant, you haven’t actually seen the ledger. Snake told you about it, which makes your information hearsay. In this country, hearsay is inadmissible in court.”

“And that means?”

“It means we can’t use your information to obtain a warrant. Snake is dead and you are the sole witness. We will have to re-file charges and start all over again.”

A sudden, crazy idea occurred to Ruth and she froze, staring into space as her mind ran through all the ramifications. It was more than crazy. Her idea was downright suicidal.

“Do I even want to know what you’re thinking?”

Ruth blinked and returned to the moment. “Carlotti will be expecting that.”

“Yeah,” Emma said carefully.

“Yeah, so...he won’t be expecting us to retrieve the book ourselves.”

Emma started and sat up, the covers falling to her lap. “Are you out of your mind?”

“Shh, lower your voice. As charming as I find your accent, Terry might still be asleep.”

Emma complied, but her lowered words were no less intense. “First off, I do not have an accent. Second of all, assuming such a thing was even possible, why would you even believe I’d go along with such a cockamamie, screwball plan?”

“Because we don’t have a choice,” Ruth answered simply. She sat up beside Emma and attempted to make her see their current reality. “Everyone we’ve trusted so far has tried to kill us. We have no witness to testify about the ledger and Carlotti is going to keep coming after me. How long do you think it’ll take before he tracks me down like he did Mister Adder?”

“You’re right about all of that, but Ruth, Carlotti’s place is like a fortress. We’d never get past his bodyguards. He doesn’t go anywhere without them and unless you have some ninja skills that I don’t know about, the only thing we’ll accomplish is our deaths.”

“So we don’t try to get the book while he’s at home. You said he’s a businessman and the night he ordered Jordan to kill me, he said he was going to a board meeting. Don’t those things happen pretty regularly?”

“About twice a week,” Emma admitted. “More often if unexpected things happen. Carlotti always holds a final meeting of the week on Fridays at eight p.m.”

“There you go.”

“There you go,” Emma mimicked. “Why didn’t I think of that? It’s not like he doesn’t have security cameras that will pick us up trying to break in or a staff that will shoot us on sight.”

“You must have some fancy spy gear that will help us get in and out. Plus, you said you’ve been after him for a long time. You must have a floorplan of his house.”

Emma sputtered in disbelief for a moment. “I’m sitting in bed trying to talk logic to a crazy woman.”

“Never mind that. What did your boss say last night?”

Emma hesitated and sadness etched her expression. “He was outraged about Lyle, of course. He sent out a team to recover the body. Harrington’s going to be okay, by the way.”

“Thank goodness.”

“Deputy Supervisor Waild said he could have a team meet us at another safe house if we want to return to the city.”

That information gave Ruth pause. “Won’t your partner have told Carlotti about all the safe house locations?”

Emma shook her head. “He probably only told him about the one we were using. Besides, the service has so many safe houses that I doubt if I know them all. Just so you know, I’m not really comfortable being so far away from everything.”

“You want to go back.”

“Yeah, I do.”

Ruth wasn’t thrilled about deliberately going toward the man who had ordered her death. Then again, if Emma eventually gave in to Ruth’s idea, they’d have to anyway. “When do we leave?”

Emma smiled and took Ruth’s hand. “Do we have enough money to get back or did you spend it all on new clothes and gas?”

Now it was Ruth’s turn to be excited. She was proud of having saved as much of their funds as she had. “Actually, I still have over a hundred dollars. It only cost thirty at a time to fill up and we only had to stop twice.”

“Wait a minute. How much did you spend at Walmart and in the drive-through?”

Ruth told her and could see the wheels spinning in Emma’s head.

“But when I hot-wired the truck, I noticed it was almost empty. That means you had to fill up in Los Angeles.”

“Right,” Ruth said enthusiastically. “I used my card so we would have cash for the rest of the trip.”

EMMA SLAPPED A hand over her face. “You did what? I told you not to use the card.”

“What’s the harm? Carlotti already knew we were there. Once we left Los Angeles, I only used cash.”

Emma was already climbing out of bed and throwing on her clothes. Her side felt stiff from the stitches and she tried not to pull something as she moved. “We have to get out of here. I need to call Waile back and get a team out here to protect Terry. Does Laramie have an airport?”

“Yes, of course, but it’s just a small one. What are you so freaked about? I told you I didn’t use the card after we left town.”

Ruth’s innocence was almost unfathomable. Sometimes she seemed so intelligent and at other times, she just didn’t get it. Emma had shoved into a new pair of jeans and a T-shirt, her breasts unrestrained. She stopped without fastening the jeans and moved closer to Ruth, placing a knee on the bed so she could take her hands.

“You are adorable, but if Carlotti doesn’t kill you, I might.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

Emma kept hold of Ruth’s hands, even when she tried to pull away in anger. She hated seeing the hurt in Ruth’s eyes and regretted the thoughtless comment, but she had to get Ruth’s attention somehow. Only blind luck had saved them thus far.

“Have you ever heard of security cameras?”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m stupid.”

“Gas stations have security cameras that are easily accessed by any computer hacker. When you used the card, you sent out an electronic signal that focused Carlotti’s search to that gas

station. Once that happened, he had a description of the vehicle we were in and the license plate. Traffic cameras all over L.A. would tell him our direction of travel.”

She could see the panic in Ruth’s eyes as she searched for a way to negate all of this. Emma wanted to reassure her, but they had no time. If a federal judge followed procedure, it would take a few hours to release Carlotti from custody once the state’s witnesses didn’t show. A computer search tracking Ruth’s credit card usage and then a separate search for traffic footage would take even longer. At most, they had half a day.

“But he couldn’t follow us once we left the city.”

“Oh honey, he wouldn’t need to. You’re a well-known, professional golfer. Your biography is on the Internet. Even I knew you had an aunt that lives in Wyoming before you ever told me. Laramie’s airport might be small, as you say, but I’d wager it’s big enough for Carlotti to fly into on his private jet.”

The pulse point on the side of Ruth’s neck began to pound. She released Emma and jumped out of bed, searching for her clothes.

“What do we tell Terry?” Ruth stripped the pink pajama top with racing bunny rabbits over her head and dropped it on the floor.

“As little as possible. If she’s not awake yet, we’ll leave a note. Tell her something came up and we had to go back to Los Angeles.”

Emma threw a light jacket on over the T-shirt. It might look a little funny to wear a jacket in this weather, but it would conceal her shoulder holster. She finished tying her shoes and picked up the phone. She dialed an emergency number, listened for a tone and then typed in a code before hanging up. Ruth watched her carefully as Emma kept her hand on the receiver. Ten seconds later, the phone rang. Emma snatched it up before the sound had fully formed.

“Marshal Blake here. I need to speak with Supervisor Waild.”

Chapter Eighteen

EMMA DROVE BACK toward Los Angeles. She kept looking in the rearview mirror, but hadn't seen any sign of a tail since leaving Terry Stanton's house an hour ago. There was very little traffic on the roadway since Emma had chosen to get off the major interstate. Taking the secondary roads would add some time to the trip, but hopefully keep them below Carlotti's radar. Still, the wide open country of the Wyoming plains had her feeling jumpy. At least the mountainous trails would keep any pursuers from having such an unbroken view of their quarry. Supervisory Deputy Marshal Waild said he'd get a team in route to keep an eye on Terry's house, but Emma prayed they wouldn't be needed. Beside her, Ruth seemed as nervous as a cat in a sack. Her eyes kept darting around and her knuckles were white where they gripped the door handle.

For some reason she couldn't begin to understand, Emma continued to circle back around to Ruth's outrageous plan. She didn't like to admit it, but the idea had a little merit. She wished they could do something that outrageous. Their options were limited. Carlotti would get to Ruth. It was only a matter of time. That was something Emma just couldn't live with. Ruth had claimed her heart the moment Emma saw her lying in a hospital bed with a concussion. She didn't know if they had a chance or not, so soon after Ruth's previous girlfriend, but Emma wanted to hold on to the possibility. The only way to do that was to take Carlotti down.

The marshal's service had full schematics on Carlotti's house and the grounds. They were on file and a matter of record. Emma had obtained the layouts a year ago after Adder agreed to testify, just in case the service had to go in and take Carlotti down hard. Emma knew how to get into his office and could obtain the equipment to break into his safe. There were several serious flaws to that plan, however.

Carlotti would still have security on duty when he wasn't home. He used attack Dobermans on the property and employed a state-of-the-art alarm system. In the event that the power went out, a backup generator would ensure the alarm remained active. Ruth's scheme also required they break in at a time of night when most people were still awake. That alone was enough to put Emma off. Then there was the fact that obtaining the ledger illegally would make it fruit of the poisonous tree. It would be just as inadmissible in court as any hearsay. There had to be another way.

"What are you thinking about?"

From her tense tone, Emma thought Ruth needed a distraction to help her stop worrying. "Believe it or not, I'm trying to think of a way to get us out of this mess."

"Any ideas?"

"None good, at least so far. I'm still having trouble believing that Lyle was dirty, but if he was, then who else is? I don't know who to call in other than my boss and he's not a field agent."

"Does this mean you're considering...what we talked about?"

"You mean your crazy, outlandish, get-us-killed-in-a-heartbeat plan? Yes, but not the way you think. It just won't work."

“So what do you suggest?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Give me a while and I’ll let you know what I come up with. Why don’t you try taking a nap?”

“As if I could sleep.”

Emma could sympathize with Ruth’s position. She wouldn’t have been able to sleep either, knowing that the head to a major crime syndicate wanted her dead. Forget wanted. Carlotti had actually tried...three times. Frowning, Emma considered that reality. Franco Carlotti didn’t typically surround himself with ineptitude and Ruth had no experience with this type of life-threatening drama.

Carlotti’s assassin, Jordan Pierce, had screwed the pooch on the first go around when Ruth survived the climbing accident. But why get Ruth’s chauffeur involved? Jordan could have given Ruth a lethal injection at the hospital and made her death look like natural causes. As far as Ruth’s assertions that Carlotti had no reason to kill her, Emma disagreed. Any cat would slap down the intrusive mouse if there was even a possibility that they’d steal the cheese. Ruth was just in the wrong place at the right time when she went climbing with her friend. The only thing out of place was Silas. It didn’t make any damned sense to use an inexperienced hit man, not even to settle a very high gambling debt.

In the end, he had used Jordan again and it had cost her life. Emma felt a twinge in her stomach and recognized the sensation as bone-chilling dread. When Carlotti found out Ruth had killed Jordan, and he would find out, the gloves would come off. He’d kill Ruth himself, reveling in the slickness of her blood on his skin.

Emma didn’t care that the mobster had no convictions. His juvenile record spoke volumes about his character. Mentally reviewing that unsealed record as she drove, Emma easily recalled charges that began with torturing the neighbor’s dog. Carlotti had moved to breaking and entering and then assault with a deadly weapon, but he never did any time. A sympathetic judge ensured that.

All the signs of an up and coming serial killer were there. Emma thought it a sure bet that he’d continued that evolution and fulfilled his destiny at some point. Carlotti was happy to order others to do his dirty work, but he was just as capable of personally eliminating a threat. There were certainly enough mysterious disappearances any time he became involved with a situation. The problem was in proving it.

Without a body, where was proof of a crime? Suspicion and rumor weren’t exactly evidence.

Frustrated that she’d just come full-circle in her reasoning, Emma snatched a quick glance at Ruth. Despite her assurance that she couldn’t sleep, Ruth’s head was propped against the window and her eyes closed. She appeared out for the count. Emma wanted nothing more than to gaze upon Ruth’s beauty, to run her fingers through the thick hair. Instead, she concentrated on the road.

The innocence she’d perceived in Ruth the first time Emma met her had struck a chord. Emma had tried to keep her shields in place, but Ruth brought out a protective side Emma had proven ill-prepared to resist. She was accustomed to protecting all manner of scumbags. It was her job and she did so without emotional attachment, but Ruth was different. She slipped past Emma’s defenses without effort, burrowing her way into Emma’s...

Emma slammed closed that line of thought. Yes, she cared for Ruth very much. She’d even admit to her physical attraction. Unfortunately, Emma didn’t think she had a chance in hell regardless of the desire she’d seen in Ruth’s eyes while they lay in bed together. Ruth wasn’t over Jordan and probably wouldn’t be any time soon, especially since she’d killed her. Maybe

when all of this was over, Ruth would at least have dinner with her. Emma really wanted to believe that friendship would be enough.

All of the emotions swirling through her had Emma in a quandary. Her driving desire to keep Ruth alive warred with her personal emotions. Coupled with that, Emma's discomfort of being in the field without backup had her jumpy and on edge. She needed a distraction, even something as simple as a cup of coffee would help. Too bad she'd just passed a sign telling her the next exit was almost twenty miles away. Out here, there was nothing but two-lane roads, rattlesnakes and forty-foot high bluffs off to the northwest. They'd been steadily traveling up toward the base of a mountain leading to Medicine Bow National Forest for the last fifteen minutes and the quiet was starting to get on Emma's nerves. All she'd seen was an occasional wild mustang and a scattered trailer or two. She wasn't accustomed to all this open countryside. Give her the city any day.

Emma glanced into the rearview mirror by habit and noticed another vehicle a fair distance behind her. As it had every time she spotted another car, her stomach did a slow roll and she briefly held her breath. She felt a tingle sing through her veins. Idly, Emma wondered if a person could run out of adrenaline. If so, she should be running on empty considering it had happened countless times already and they'd barely started their journey.

She took a deep breath, attempting to slow her thundering heart with the assurance that other drivers had the right to be on the road. Despite her logic, she continued to watch the advancing vehicle. It closed distance quickly and Emma glanced down at the speedometer. She was going about five miles under the speed limit. From the way the other car flew up behind her, Emma estimated the other driver was doing at least fifteen over. She hoped they were just in a really big hurry.

Remaining hyper-aware, Emma tensed further when the black SUV swerved into the on-coming lane and drew up alongside. She let go of the wheel with one hand and wrapped her fingers around the butt of her pistol. After unfastening the holster with her thumb, Emma held off on drawing the weapon from the shoulder holster.

The SUV shot up the road until even with Emma and Ruth. Emma expected gunfire to erupt since Carlotti seemed to be such a fan of easily concealed automatic weapons. She laughed and put her shaky hand back on the steering wheel when she spotted the young men drinking beer and waving as they passed. Once beyond the Chevy, the driver swerved back into Emma's lane and tore up the mountain pass.

On a normal day, Emma would concern herself with their drinking and driving, but this wasn't a normal day. She only hoped nothing happened to the boys or she'd carry the guilt with her from now on. From their perspective, she'd just given them a free pass and Emma didn't regret that for a second. Her priority was getting back to the city as quickly as possible and hiding Ruth somewhere the bad guys could never find her.

The engine of the stolen truck suddenly coughed and Emma felt the vehicle buck beneath them. Emma's eyes flew to the dash controls. Most of the warning lights burned steadily, conflicting with the information Emma needed. That was when she noticed the odor. Something smelled hot, like the engine was about to catch on fire.

Emma glanced at Ruth just as she awakened with a worried look on her face. Ruth didn't show any signs of grogginess, seeming instantly awake.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure, but I think our situation just got worse."

The engine died before she could say anything else. Emma directed the Chevy toward the knee-high grass on the side of the road, relieved when they coasted to a stop off the blacktop.

Steam billowed out from under the hood. Her peace of mind lasted briefly before evaporating like the steam in the wind.

“Now what?” Ruth asked, unwittingly voicing Emma’s own concerns. “Try to catch a ride?”

“I haven’t seen a lot of cars on this road so I don’t know about that.”

Emma removed the key from the ignition, more from habit than worry someone would steal the pickup. She reached behind the seat and tossed Ruth her bag. Emotions of worry and confusion chased themselves across Ruth’s features.

“This doesn’t look like the interstate. Where are we?”

“Snowy Mountain Road. I didn’t want to take a major route.”

Emma retrieved her backpack from the rear floorboard. She couldn’t meet Ruth’s eyes as she unzipped the bag and tossed a couple of bottles of water inside. Emma spotted the weapons Ruth had removed from Lyle Moore’s body. Waiting for the explosion she figured would soon follow, Emma chambered a round into the barrel of each in preparation of a confrontation she hoped would never come.

“You see how well that worked out,” Ruth said sharply. “Maybe next time you shouldn’t steal an old heap. I told you to take the Mustang. Didn’t I tell you to take the Mustang?”

Her voice was at such a feverish pitch that Emma’s ears hurt. She decided her hearing would survive better outside the enclosed cab of the dilapidated pickup. Emma opened the door, briefly checking the empty roadway before shoving it open and climbing out. Ruth’s reaction would be almost funny if not for their dire predicament.

“We can’t stand here arguing, Ruth. Get your things.”

Apparently, Ruth wasn’t quite ready to give up and follow sedately along with whatever Emma requested. “Why don’t we use our cells? You could call AAA or something.”

“Not a chance. I told you we can’t use the cells unless it’s an emergency.”

“I think this qualifies.”

Emma snorted. “Not even close. First off, I doubt AAA comes out this far and I’m not waiting around with my face hanging out if Carlotti’s people come along.”

“And second?”

“There’s an exit about a mile up the road. With any luck, we’ll find a pay phone, gas station and somewhere to get breakfast.”

“Not with the kind of luck we have.”

Emma ignored the remark. They had left this morning without eating anything and Emma regretted that decision now. They should have had breakfast and waited for the team Waild had sent to keep an eye on Terry. Ruth wanted to, although she had the good manners not to say so now. A deep-seated sense of urgency that told her time was running out caused Emma to override that decision.

“We’re just going to walk? Have you actually heard of rattlesnakes? What if someone comes along and plows into us?”

“I should be so lucky,” Emma mumbled over her shoulder, already headed down WY-130 going west.

“What?”

Finally, out of patience, Emma spun back around. She was surprised to find Ruth less than six inches away, but kept the reaction hidden. “Ruth, I’m sure by now you’ve figured out how much I care about you, but I don’t have the time to coddle you just now. You need to cooperate. I’m not asking you to walk a marathon. It’s a mile. And unless you have super powers that I don’t know about, yes, I expect you to walk.”

She set off again and, after a stunned moment of hesitation, heard the crunch of Ruth's shoes against the gravel as she rushed to catch up. Emma's head was on a swivel as they walked, looking for a carful of black or camo-clad hit men to drive up on them. She could see the exit in the distance when she heard the sound of a car engine approaching from behind. Emma glanced around quickly, thankful that sound traveled so far out here in the open. Ruth started as Emma grabbed her arm and shoved her down in the high grass.

"What the hell are you doing? We might be able to hitch a ride."

Ruth tried to stand, but Emma pressed her back down. Emma felt her stitches pull, but gritted her teeth.

"Stay put. For all you know, you'll be hitching a ride with the people who are trying to kill you."

Again, the vehicle proved no threat. Emma watched a two-tone farm truck drive by. There was a single occupant. She had a brief impression of a thin, sun-baked man wearing a cowboy hat sitting behind the wheel. As he disappeared into the distance, Ruth gave her a scathing look through narrowed eyes, but didn't comment.

Emma helped Ruth up and dusted herself off. By unspoken agreement, they started down the highway together. Emma noticed that Ruth was limping slightly. She hadn't considered Ruth's previous injuries when she tackled her to the ground.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Her sharp answer silenced Emma, but then Ruth continued in a softer tone. "My leg gets better every day. It just hurts sometimes if I move too fast."

Emma switched her duffel to the other hand, swallowing her guilt. "I'm sorry about that. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know."

An acknowledgement, nothing more. Her sense of remorse deepened. Ruth hadn't let her off the hook, illustrating that she understood Emma's actions, but didn't forgive her for them. The next fifteen minutes passed quietly. No other vehicles approached, for which Emma was grateful. Despite Ruth's irritation, she would tackle her again without hesitation if she felt she needed to. Emma spied the exit in the distance and searched excitedly for signs of civilization.

On the interstate, she'd already be able to see gas stations or fast food joints, certainly signs of other people. Not here. There was nothing but more open sky and barbed wire fencing. At the top of the exit, Emma and Ruth had an unencumbered view of their surroundings. Emma took in the panoramic view of the wild mountains to the right and the flat plains to the left.

Ruth spun in a circle, taking things in before she looked to Emma for direction. Emma could practically hear her ask, "Which way?"

"Right," Emma said.

"Left," Ruth announced at the same time.

Ruth rolled her eyes and Emma spoke quickly, giving her reasoning before Ruth could argue. "There will be more people if we go toward Medicine Bow National Forest. We have a better chance of finding help. The only thing we'll find to the left are those rattlesnakes you mentioned."

"Except that this isn't exactly the tourist season and it's the middle of the week. Not only that, but how far is it to Medicine Bow?"

"I'm not sure," Emma admitted, "but we'll run into it eventually if we go right."

Ruth looked skeptical, but waved for Emma to precede her. They headed toward the mountains. The terrain around the small, paved road became rougher, prairie grass giving way to

tall trees and thick scrub. At least here they were out of the sun and had the shade of trees to walk beneath. Emma had tried to sound confident about her decision, but she was as equally out of her element here as Ruth was. Her only edge was her law enforcement experience. As they came around a bend in the road, Emma almost cheered when she spotted the sign that announced a vacancy adjacent to a seedy-looking motel. The sign announced the Mountain Paradise.

As they closed the distance, the trees revealed the rest of the picture and Emma scowled in concern. A single late-model station wagon resided in the weed-choked parking lot. It sat directly in front of the office, but the whole place had a deserted air. Emma slowed to a stop before setting foot on the cracked lot.

“What is it?” Ruth quickly scanned the area, her fear evident.

“It doesn’t look like anyone’s around. I wouldn’t get your hopes up.”

“There’s a car sitting right there,” Ruth responded stubbornly. “Someone must be here.”

“Or they broke down like we did and left it behind.”

Ruth wasn’t listening. She foraged ahead, forcing Emma to follow. Emma would have checked the office anyway. Should the entire motel prove abandoned, they still might find something useful. Like a phone. In any other situation, with any other person, Emma thought she’d probably be annoyed. Ruth was ornery, rarely taking anything Emma told her at face value. For some reason, Emma found Ruth’s obstinacy and skepticism sexy. Then again, maybe Emma just liked bossy women. One thing was for sure: Ruth had changed a lot since the first time Emma saw her. She still possessed that naïve streak, but now, Ruth showed a strength previously hidden that Emma never could have guessed. It just might be enough to see her through all the difficulties that lay ahead with witness protection and persevering until they brought Carlotti to trial.

“Hey, wait up.”

She hurried forward, passing Ruth just as she reached the door to the lobby. Surprisingly, it wasn’t locked. The air inside the building was cooler than outside, but not by much. Still, Emma reveled in the respite from the blazing sun. The décor consisted of burnt orange plastic chairs, a matching sofa, one lamp without a shade on a scratched end table and a stuffed antelope head on the wall over the check-in desk. At least Emma thought it was an antelope. She’d never been a hunter so all she really knew was that animal had possessed horns.

No one stood behind the desk, but a service bell presented a temptation she couldn’t ignore. Emma stepped up and slapped her hand down on the ringer. Her inner musings broke off when a door leading into an interior room opened abruptly. In an instant, Emma’s sweeping gaze assessed the registration clerk. Caucasian male of average height, beer gut and a dark growth of stubble covering his cheeks. Greasy brown hair that looked like it hadn’t seen shampoo in a week. A cheap plastic nametag told Emma his name.

“Roy” wore a wrinkled cowboy shirt complete with rolled up sleeves and food stains. The shirt tucked into a pair of faded jeans, but she didn’t think that was the product of any driving need for neatness. More likely, Roy just wanted to display the silver mud flap woman on his belt buckle. Combined with the open, facedown issue of *Hustler* and the leer on Roy’s face, things seemed to be going downhill quickly.

“Sorry about that, ladies. I had to see a man about a horse.”

His gaze darted between them and Emma felt her stomach turn. She bit back a comment that it was more like a pony. When Roy offered them a smile, Emma did her best to overlook his rotting teeth.

“Do you have a payphone I can use?”

“Are you kidding me? Who uses payphones anymore? Everybody has the latest electronic gadgets these days. I keep saying all this technology is gonna cause serious problems someday, but nobody listens to old Roy...”

Emma cut him off before Roy could really get going. “What about the motel phone? It’s long distance, but I can call collect.”

“Sorry, phone’s only for employees. Besides, it’s not working.” Roy leaned toward them in a conspiratorial manner and lowered his voice, though there wasn’t anyone else around. “The owner forgot to pay the bill.”

“That’s just great,” Ruth said sharply. “So where is the closest phone?”

“Right up the road at the next exit.”

“Thanks, we’ll be on our way. Come on, Ruth.”

“Of course the next exit is ten miles up the road.”

Ruth grabbed Emma by the open collar of her shirt and pulled her away from the counter. They moved over to the corner where Roy couldn’t overhear their whispered conversation.

“What do you think?”

Emma quickly ran some calculations in her head. “The average person walks about three miles per hour. That’s a little over three hours to travel ten miles, assuming we can’t hitch a ride.”

“I can’t walk that far, Emma. My leg is getting better every day and it’s pretty strong, but I don’t think I can make it.”

The expression on Ruth’s face hinted at remorse for her physical limitations, but Emma felt like a heel for forgetting the previous injuries. All things considered, it was just short of miraculous that Ruth had done as well as she had. She had nothing to feel bad about. Unfortunately, her condition severely limited their options. Emma pulled her cell phone out of the belt holster.

“What are you doing?” Ruth hissed.

“I’m calling Waield.”

“But you said Carlotti and his goons could track us if we turned on the phones.”

Emma nodded. “I’m sure Lyle gave them my number so they could do just that. I disabled the GPS before I pulled the battery out, but if I turn the phone on a hacker could reactivate the GPS remotely.”

“Then you can’t take the chance.”

Ruth was right to be concerned, but Emma felt the need to reassure her. “If I keep the conversation short, we should be okay. It’ll take them a few seconds to turn it on, even if they’re waiting for it.”

“How short a conversation?”

“Thirty seconds?”

“Thirty...? Emma, there’s no way you can tell him what you need to in thirty seconds. You have to go to the next exit without me.”

Even the thought of leaving Ruth unprotected went against everything Emma believed in. She would never consider such a thing with any witness, much less someone she cared for.

“Ruth, I’m not leaving you behind.”

Ruth shook her head, a sad smile gracing her lips. “You have to. We need help. I can get a room and wait for you to come back. If you do get a ride, it should only take you...two hours at most. I can manage a few hours without you.”

“And if I don’t?”

“Then you can still call for reinforcements. At the most, you’ll be gone nine hours and that’s if you have to walk the whole way. In the meantime, I can get some water from the room and take it back down to the truck. I’m sure Roy has an old pitcher around here I can use and the radiator should be cooled off enough for me to take the cap off by the time I get back.”

Nine hours sounded like a lifetime. “Uh uh, no way. You are not going back down to the truck on your own. If I agree to this, you have to promise to stay inside the room while I’m gone.”

“Emma, be reasonable. No one even knows we’re here and this way we’ll save time.”

“That’s the deal,” Emma retorted. “Take it or leave it. Either I use the cell phone or I go for help while you stay in the room. You choose.”

Ruth tried to talk her into doing things her way, but Emma refused to budge. She considered Ruth a capable woman, but refused to do anything that might put her in harm’s way. Emma realized it was a long shot that they were in any immediate danger, but couldn’t bring herself to tempt fate by doing things Ruth’s way. When she finally concluded that Emma wouldn’t give in on this, Ruth finally conceded.

“Fine, but that means you’ll have to try and find a tow truck, too.”

“Done.”

Emma turned back toward the counter to discover Roy checking out her ass. She ground her teeth together, but walked over to the motel ledger to sign in.

Roy offered another lecherous grin. “Will that be by the hour or for the night?”

Emma glanced at Ruth and suppressed a shudder. “One night.”

She signed them in as Emma Smyth and Hortense Johns. Her quirky sense of humor couldn’t resist giving Ruth such a horrible name. Roy checked the ledger, no doubt noting the last names, and raised an eyebrow in disbelief. He didn’t comment, but turned away to retrieve a key.

“Can we get a room as far from the parking lot as possible, somewhere in the back?”

“Sure,” Roy tossed over his shoulder. “You can have any room you want, including mine. It’s not like we’re busy this time of year.”

Emma took the key and shook her head when Roy offered to show them to the room. He was probably hoping to get lucky with two women at the same time. As if. They located the room, as requested, on the far side of the motel away from the road. It was the last one on the end away from the lobby as well. Emma struggled a bit with the lock and shoved the door open against the swollen frame.

“Whew!” Ruth complained, entering in the lead. She dropped her bag on the single bed and headed straight to the air conditioning unit.

The system rumbled to life grudgingly as Emma dropped her backpack onto the floor and knelt down to dig inside. She could hear Ruth running water in the bathroom while she retrieved what she was looking for. Seconds later, Ruth emerged, wiping moisture from her face with a rough white towel.

“What are you doing?”

Emma stood and offered Lyle’s small revolver to Ruth, butt first. “Take this. There’s no safety so keep your finger off the trigger. Put it somewhere you can reach it easily.”

“Okay, I don’t like it, but I understand.” Ruth took the weapon, holding it down by her side. Emma was pleased to see that she kept her finger outside the trigger housing.

“Promise me that you’ll lock the door and not open it for anyone until I get back.”

“I promise on one condition. Bring back something to eat. I’m starving and I seriously doubt this place has a single vending machine.”

Emma smiled, still feeling a little sick at what she was about to do. “I will. See you in a bit.”

She took one last, lingering look into Ruth’s eyes, tempted to kiss her. To Emma’s surprise, Ruth’s gaze softened and it seemed she might actually be receptive. Wishful thinking, she told herself, backing away. Her hand automatically went to check that her own pistol remained tucked into the shoulder holster before she headed out.

Chapter Nineteen

EMMA LEFT THE motel, walking fast toward the main highway. Firmly keeping in mind that she wasn't out for a stroll, she headed west. She couldn't resist casting a look back at the blue pickup she'd boosted in Los Angeles. It sat right where they'd left it. Then again, Snowy Mountain Road wasn't exactly teeming with highway patrol who'd love nothing more than to tow or ticket the soul unlucky enough to break down out here.

She made good time, spotting the next exit two hours and fifty minutes later. Emma figured it would take another ten before she got off the road and her stitches stung, seemingly in response. Walking so fast made her sweat and Emma felt the salty moisture slipping into the fresh wound. Casting her eyes overhead, Emma spotted clouds beginning to gather. Grey and foreboding, they nevertheless provided some shelter from the direct sunlight.

A loud engine roar made Emma turn. A heavy diesel truck pulled up alongside her and the window lowered.

"You need a ride, ma'am?"

"Thank you so much."

Emma didn't hesitate to jump into the vehicle, perceiving no threat from the much older man. His clothing, cowboy hat and the scent of hay suggested he was probably a local rancher.

"Where you headed?"

"A pay phone, a gas station and somewhere to get something to eat. Someone told me I might be able to find those things off this next exit."

The man nodded. "I'd guess so. Not sure about the pay phone, but I'm sure someone could help you out. Was that your pickup back down the road?"

No, but she could hardly admit to that. Nor could she pull out her badge and force him to help her. Emma inherently trusted she could count on him, but she'd been fooled before. This could all be a ruse. It was a stretch that a random fella who stopped to offer her a ride was in cahoots with Carlotti, but she'd believed in Lyle, too. They were partners for years and he still gave in to money's temptation. What she needed was a trained team of marshals to ride in and save the day.

"Uh, yeah," she responded finally. "I think it just needs some water in the radiator."

Emma never learned his name, but the rancher drove her up the exit and dropped her at a gas station. She obtained a gallon of water, but had no luck with a tow truck. He offered to wait and drive her back to the truck, which Emma happily accepted. She ran across the street while he refueled and grabbed some fast food and bottled soft drinks.

After Emma retrieved the food, she found a pay phone on the wall back by the restrooms. She chewed on a couple of French fries while she waited for her call to go through.

"Marshal Blake, where have you been?" Waile demanded as soon as she was put through.

"It's a long story. Suffice it to say that our ride broke down, but we managed to get out of sight at a motel. I need someone to come and get us so we can get Ms. Gallagher back to L.A."

“I’ll get right on it, but listen there’s something you need to know. Ms. Stanton had some bad news for the team I sent out to keep an eye on her. After you left Laramie, the Stanton woman saw a sedan pull up in her yard. It only stayed a moment before it pulled out and drove over to her neighbor’s house.”

Emma had an unpleasant feeling that she knew what was coming next. Hadn’t Terry told them that her neighbor was a bit of a busybody? “Yes sir, I’m listening.”

“The driver was a woman. She got out of the car and talked to the neighbor for a minute. Apparently, Stanton got the impression they were discussing her recent guests. After a moment, the driver jumped back into the car and tore out of there headed west.”

“Do we have a description of the sedan or the occupants?” Emma was surprised she sounded so calm. Surely, her voice should be trembling considering the way her heart bounced off her ribs.

Waild hesitated and Emma heard the sound of papers shuffling over the connection. “A light-green four-door rental. Stanton saw an Enterprise sticker on the rear bumper.”

So they had flown into the small airstrip. She had expected as much. Emma waited for Waild to resume.

“Stanton said the woman wore dark clothes, but she was too far away for any details. She’s not sure how many others were in the car.”

The hazards of an inexperienced witness, she thought in frustration. Emma appreciated that Terry had kept an eye on things after they left, but working with so few details put Emma in a tight spot. She had no idea how many adversaries she faced, only that one was female and they drove a non-descript green rental.

“How long until you can have backup sent our way, sir?”

This time, Emma heard Waild’s slow intake of breath. She steeled herself for more unsettling news. “I only found out about twenty minutes ago.”

It had taken Waild that long to get people to Terry’s house. Anger stole over her and Emma had trouble biting back a sharp retort. Typical government bureaucracy. Terry could have died before her protection arrived. Only the fact that she knew Ruth’s aunt was all right allowed Emma to push that all aside for the moment in consideration of more pressing matters.

“Did she say how long after we left before the sedan arrived?”

“Ms. Stanton wasn’t really paying attention so she wasn’t able to be specific. She said it was a couple of hours, but that was a best guess.”

Emma closed her eyes and lightly thumped her head against the wall. For all she knew, Carlotti’s men were pulling into the motel at that exact moment. The blue truck was like a neon sign on the roadway announcing exactly where they’d gone. “I have to get back there, sir. How long until I can expect backup?”

“I’ve already given the order,” Waild told her. “As soon as I heard about it, I sent the team guarding Terry Stanton your way. They should arrive within the hour.”

Emma quickly gave her supervisor the location of the motel and their room number. Then she hung up, grabbed the food and jogged back across the street. In the event that she was overreacting and the neighbor’s visitors had nothing to do with them, she and Ruth would still need to eat. She didn’t want to overreact and scare the hell out of Ruth for no reason, but Emma couldn’t leave her alone any longer either.

The rancher stood leaning against his truck, ready to drive Emma back to the abandoned blue Chevy. Instead, she gave him a quick excuse about “a friend” that waited for her back at the motel. He dropped her at the top of the exit adjacent to the Mountain Paradise. She gripped the

handle of the plastic water jug in one hand and the sacks of food and bottled drinks in the other as she ran down the blacktop. Less than a quarter mile away, it seemed to take forever before Emma hit the parking lot.

Roy's station wagon remained in its previous spot and at first all seemed in order. Emma took a deep breath, trying to slow her racing pulse. Then she noticed the hood to the station wagon was ajar. As a fully trained and experienced law enforcement officer, Emma had great attention to detail. The hood hadn't been open before.

Emma jogged to the corner of the building, leaning her shoulder against the brick façade and peaking around the edge. Nothing moved. She slowly bent over without removing her eyes from the scene and placed everything on the ground to free up her hands. Reaching under her jacket, Emma slid the .40 caliber Glock out of the holster and held it at the ready. She listened intently, but not even birdcalls disturbed the silence. The clouds had thickened and darkened in the short time Emma spent away from the motel and everything seemed to be holding its collective breath, waiting for the storm to break.

After crouching down to make a smaller target, Emma eased down the front of the building toward the lobby. She had a driving desire to check on Ruth, but Roy could just as easily become a victim of the relentless mobster and she couldn't move on without checking on him. The wooden door to the motel office was ajar, only the screen keeping the insects out. Emma leaned around the frame and peered through the mesh before quickly jerking back. She hadn't seen anything unusual like a group of hit men standing around so Emma tried for a longer look. Everything inside appeared as it had when she and Ruth first arrived. The plastic orange furniture remained and she could hear the whine of the air conditioning.

She reached for the door handle with her left hand, keeping her gun up and her eyes moving for any signs of life. Emma slid inside the opening as soon as it was wide enough. She felt like an easy target, standing in the center of the lobby without anything to hide behind. A familiar smell struck her nose and Emma followed the scent toward the registration desk. She already knew what she'd find before she looked over the desk.

Roy lay on the floor with a bullet hole in the center of his forehead. His death was something a coroner might call a "pop and drop." He'd died instantly. Emma could still smell the cordite so this hadn't happened long ago. Instinct told her she was alone inside the office, but she felt sure there had to be a back entrance. Running back out the way she'd come in wasn't advisable and she had to get to Ruth without being seen...or killed.

Without hesitation, Emma entered the room from which Roy had emerged earlier in the day. She found herself in a small sitting room complete with a nineteen-inch television that was currently off. As predicted, a door on the far wall promised her easy access to the rear of the motel. As she slipped carefully outside, Emma's desperate eyes searched in the direction of their room and her breath caught in her throat. They had requested a room in the back to avoid detection. That decision had in fact worked against them.

Emma saw a light-green four-door sedan parked a few spaces from Ruth's unit. The door to their room was ajar and an open can of soda lay spilled on the sidewalk. Expecting the worst, but fervently hoping for the best, Emma sprinted toward the room. She burst in with the Glock up and her finger on the trigger, utilizing the element of surprise. No one was home.

"Ruth?" she called out softly. Emma checked every place Ruth could conceivably hide. Nothing.

"Damn it, where are you?" Emma muttered.

A gunshot exploded from outside, echoing loudly through the trees and across the motel lot. Worst case scenarios flooded her mind. Emma feared that Ruth had just been shot and desperately needed her. She grabbed her rucksack before scooting out the door and racing into the woods toward the gunshot. Her bag contained a small first-aid kit and Lyle's service weapon. She prayed she'd need neither.

Emma ran toward the woods surrounding the motel as though the hounds of hell snapped at her heels. Unable to think of anything but getting to Ruth, she was only dimly aware of the rucksack bouncing against her back. Lyle's semi-automatic resided there, but Emma hadn't time to retrieve it as she leapt over fallen tree limbs and skirted tangled shrubs. The toe of her sneaker snagged on something and Emma pitched forward. Unable to adjust from a headlong sprint into a stumble, she landed flat on her face. The Glock sailed from her grip, but she couldn't concentrate on that through the pain that seared the flesh of her abdomen.

She held her breath, trying valiantly not to cry out and draw unwanted attention to her position. The effort left Emma a little dizzy and nauseated. Desperately, after the briefest of pauses, Emma gulped in a cleansing breath and scrambled to her knees. Leaves littered the forest floor and in the waning light she couldn't see the firearm anywhere.

Please, please, Emma silently chanted, searching with her hands as much as with her eyes. She scooted forward and her knee came down on something hard. Convinced she'd lost Ruth in her clumsiness, Emma clamped down on a sob as she grabbed the pistol and lunged to her feet. She took off again, following a narrow game trail, heedless of the spreading warmth that tracked down her torso.

The humidity became more noticeable as she moved and the wind suddenly picked up, lifting the short blond hair off Emma's forehead. Lightning split the sky and she smelled ozone on the air. The sun had headed toward the horizon even as the clouds darkened more, becoming ominous, thick and pendulous. Emma had to find Ruth before the sun set and the storm began in earnest. In full darkness, surrounded by a thunderstorm, she would have no chance of doing so.

Unexpectedly, the trail vanished. Emma slowed and then stopped. She looked all around but didn't know which way to go. Without follow-up sounds, shouted words or more gunfire, she had nothing to track. The wind caused the trees and vegetation to whip about, creating heavy rustling noises and movement that confused her senses.

Over the strong gusts and agitated foliage, Emma caught the steady pounding rhythm of running feet. Optimistic that Ruth had inadvertently found her, Emma nevertheless fancied erring on the side of caution. She crouched low, hiding between the gnarled roots of a massive tree. By peering around the side, she spotted someone in black tactical trousers and matching boots. She couldn't see their upper body without standing and revealing her location, but it was definitely not Ruth.

As they passed by, Emma kept low and out of sight. She used the few seconds afforded to catch her breath and determine her next move. This was the outer edge of a national forest, a place open to the public. It was conceivable that the person in the woods was merely out for an invigorating hike.

Yeah, out for a walk wearing heavy black clothing with an impending thunderstorm overhead.

Emma found it far more likely that this was one of their uninvited guests, no doubt hunting for them with orders to eliminate them on sight. She intended to remain concealed, but she could also use this as an opportunity. Using the growing strength of the wind as an ally, Emma trailed her quarry from a distance in the off chance he would lead her to Ruth. Fat raindrops began to

fall. At first, the treetops absorbed the moisture, but soon the rain overwhelmed the vegetation and soaked into her hair and clothing. Disregarding the water that trailed under her shirt and skittered down her back, Emma followed at a distance.

Within minutes, Emma spotted the roof of a low-slung restroom nearby. A low wooden rail embedded in the turf before the building held an unreadable sign attached with a rope. One end of the rope still held the metal placard, but the other end lay on the ground, frayed and useless. She was close enough now to see that the person she trailed was male. He headed unswervingly for the structure and disappeared inside. Suddenly, the wind intensified to a frightening degree. Unable to resist, she looked away from the stranger to see trees tossing wildly in response. The sky around them had taken on a sickly greenish cast and a wall cloud covered the entire area.

Leaves and debris swept off the forest floor, most blowing harmlessly away. Some not. Less than twenty feet away, on the right side of the restroom entrance, Emma watched entranced as debris churned high up in a circular motion. In a split-second, a thin, whirling tunnel dropped from the sky. Though tapered and not yet fully born, the phenomenon was clearly a developing tornado.

Before she had time to run for cover, the man emerged from the building. Emma registered the surprise in his eyes when he spotted her and the mustache plastered to his face from the rain. Plainly oblivious to the danger, he raised the micro Uzi pistol. Emma threw herself to the side and toward the ground, temporarily forgetful of her torn stitches. The impact with solid turf was a painful reminder, but not nearly as frightening as the sound of bullets whizzing past her head. Emma scurried to her feet and toward the small bathrooms, terrified of both the whirling dervish and the mini-machine gun.

Emma glanced toward the killer as she ran and returned fire. The first two rounds were wide off the mark, intended more to make him stop shooting so she could get to safety. She saw the tornado moving toward her attacker and made a break for the building, keeping a terrified eye on both threats.

Undeterred and still unaware, the man aimed his weapon again. Emma saw it all, every motion taking on a surreal cast as events converged and seemed to slow. Her bullet caught him high in the chest, pitching him backward even as the tornado moved close enough to catch hold. She witnessed the exact moment the truth of his predicament permeated the assassin's brain. He let go of the Uzi. At less than four pounds, the tornado sucked the pistol into the vortex. The killer threw himself forward, away from the tornado at the same time that Emma dove for the frayed rope on the park sign. She was too far away to make it to the bathroom and the rope offered slim hope of saving her from a horrible death, but it was the only option.

Despite his efforts to claw away from the funnel cloud, Emma saw him sliding backwards. His boots left furrows in the saturated ground. Then he was gone, hauled away by Mother Nature's unpredictability. One threat eliminated, Emma was more terrified than ever. The tornado slid closer, pulling everything not nailed down into the funnel. Emma wrapped the rope around her hands several times with the knowledge that she could never hold on without that added support.

Her feet left the ground, tugging her body upward until she was slanted at a forty-five degree angle. The backpack she wore did nothing to keep her grounded. The force of the tornado stretched the rope taut, her arms extended fully. Emma screamed at the sensation of her limbs separating from the sockets, the sound snatched away on the high wind. Tears streamed from her eyes, never making it to her cheeks. G-forces sucked the oxygen away, making it difficult to draw breath.

Without warning, the power of the tornado lessened and Emma landed face down in the grass and dirt. She spit out a mouthful of pine needles and turned her head. The tornado had fizzled out, leaving the rain, thunder and lightning in its wake. She could almost believe she'd imagined things, but the damage left behind was unmistakable. Saplings had uprooted and snapped like kindling. Her assailant lay unmoving against a massive trunk. Emma shakily stood and unwrapped the rope from her palms, wincing from the abraded skin. She walked over on unsteady legs to check on the man, discovering him very dead, either from the bullet wound in his chest or from being wrapped backward around a tree. She didn't know which and at the moment she didn't care. She had bigger problems.

Emma hurried a few feet away and bent over to puke. For the first time today, she was thankful she'd only eaten a couple of fries since yesterday. She wiped her mouth and took a deep breath before turning her face up to the cleansing rain. Continuing her search for Ruth pressed Emma into moving, but she had to take a second to regain her composure.

"Marcus, where are you?"

The unexpected female voice caused Emma to jump. She turned in fear even as she recognized the static sound of a radio transmitter. Other than the dead body, she remained alone in the clearing. Emma scanned the ground, attempting to narrow down the radio's location.

"Check your GPS for coordinates, and get over here." The woman's urgent, low-pitched tones suggested she had Ruth cornered.

Emma shouted in triumph and snatched the two-way off the ground. She'd never be able to pass herself off as the dead man, but by holding onto the radio, Emma might find out how many adversaries she faced. After retrieving the device, Emma hurried toward the body. She hesitated to touch the bloody form, but she needed the GPS the female dirt bag had mentioned. Trying not to notice the obviously broken back, twisted like a pretzel, Emma searched his pockets. She found an extra clip for the Uzi, useless without the weapon, and a Garmin GPS. Coordinates flashed, giving Emma hope that they would lead straight to Ruth.

THE HAMMERING RAIN pelted down over Ruth's head, stinging her face and obscuring her vision. Although drenched, the force of the wind still whipped her hair about. Lightning shattered the sky in multiple strobes, followed by the boom of thunder. Fog drifted low over the landscape obscuring the ground, a byproduct of the cold rain hitting the sun-warmed ground. Ruth pressed backward against a dirt and rock embankment, trying to stay out of the repeated bolts of lightning. With the storm raging all around, Ruth couldn't hear her pursuers, but she knew they were still out there.

She'd seen a woman and two men exit the sedan in the motel parking lot. From the way they dressed, Ruth knew instantly they weren't knocking on doors to preach the good word. She'd high-tailed it into the woods without a second thought. Going back into the hotel room would only buy her a short reprieve. Once they searched the other rooms, these murderers would find her and the tiny sanctum would become a deathtrap since there was only one way in or out. A simple quest for a vending machine and something to quench her thirst had ended up saving her life...at least for now.

Emma had to be back by now and searching for her. All Ruth had to do was avoid these people until Emma arrived to save the day.

"There you are."

The voice was not one that she expected to hear ever again. Ruth met the dark, cold-blooded gaze and knew she wouldn't survive to see Emma's return. Carlotti himself had come for her. Anger and hatred warred for dominance in his visage, blurred by the rivulets of water cascading over him.

"I'm going to enjoy taking you out myself."

"Wait," Ruth cried, desperately raising her hands in a futile gesture of self defense.

Carlotti did wait, but she saw that it was only so he could move closer. Never dropping eye contact, he climbed a small rise to get a better angle. He stopped about six feet away, aiming the gun at Ruth's chest. Ruth thought his weapon was different than the others. The woman and the guy she'd previously named "Mustache Man" carried automatics of some sort. Carlotti carried a regular handgun like the one Ruth had seen Emma take from her dead partner. She didn't know much about weapons, but it didn't really matter. A single round would kill her just as dead.

"Why should I? You killed the only person that mattered and now I'm going to return the favor."

Bright flashes of light and thunder punctuated his words. Ruth looked away when she saw Carlotti's arm tense. A flare intense enough to hurt even through closed eyes followed quickly by a cannon-like boom threw her back against the muddy wall.

I'm hit, Ruth thought. Dazed by terror, it took a moment to realize she remained unharmed. Ruth's gaze shot back to Carlotti and she saw him lying face down. Emma came running out of the darkness, passing heedless by the body in her flight to Ruth. She didn't hesitate to throw her arms around Ruth and draw her into a tight hug.

Emma pushed away again almost instantly. Her hands trailed quickly over Ruth's face and shoulders. "Are you hurt? I was so worried."

"No, I'm okay. Thank God you got here when you did. He was going to kill me."

A confused look settled on Emma's features. "Who was going to kill you?"

"Carlotti!" Ruth pointed to the motionless man. "I thought you shot him."

Emma walked over and knelt beside the fallen mobster. She reached down as though to touch him, but pulled her hand back at the last second.

"He's as crispy as a fresh batch of pork crackling. Lightning must have hit him. The gun's fused to his hand."

Relief hit her so hard that Ruth felt light-headed. "Oh thank God."

When Emma returned to her side, Ruth initiated another hug. Her arms were high up around Emma's neck, over the top of her wet pack. It felt so good to hold Emma's warm body and know that she was safe. Ruth had been afraid that Carlotti or his people killed her. Emma returned the embrace and then spoke into her ear.

"We need to get out of this lightning, plus there's another one out there...a woman."

"I know. I saw her at the motel."

She drew back and Ruth saw the blood. It covered the front of Emma's shirt, soaking through the material like ink on a page. "You've been hurt!"

"What?" Emma followed her gaze. "Uh, no. I mean I pulled my stitches loose, but I haven't been shot."

Once she'd convinced Ruth that she was all right, Emma took her hand and pulled Ruth back the direction from which she'd come. Ruth trusted her to know what she was doing and followed along without complaint. There wasn't much point in talking in this downpour anyway. They had only gone a few feet when the woman Emma mentioned came out of the darkness moving quickly. Ruth saw the barrel pointed toward them and heard the woman's yell of fury as she

came. Rounds went off and fire burst from the end of the weapon. Emma shoved Ruth aside and returned fire as she hit the ground. Ruth pulled her face out of the mud and looked back for Emma. She squatted nearby, taking refuge behind a fallen log. The female assassin had disappeared.

“It’s over,” Emma shouted into the night. “Your boss is dead.”

A pause and then, “You’re lying.”

Emma sounded funny to Ruth’s ears. Her voice was a little too high and she panted as she spoke. Ruth couldn’t see her very well except when the lightning flashed and then it was like a strobe effect, but she thought Emma might be seriously injured. Fear like she’d never imagined tore through Ruth, ripping her soul in half. Ruth desperately needed to get to her, to see for herself that Emma was okay. She rose onto her knees, but Emma caught the movement.

“No,” she said harshly. “Stay there.”

The voice came from the night again. “If the Don is dead, where’s his body?”

“A few feet behind us,” Emma responded, breathless. “He got hit by lightning.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that? Where’s Marcus?”

“Marcus is dead. He tried to kill me and I shot him.”

Ruth noticed that Emma didn’t mention Carlotti again and rushed to verify her story. “It’s true about Carlotti. If you don’t believe us, check for yourself.”

Silence met her words and Ruth thought the woman was just waiting for another chance to kill them. Then she slowly edged into view, coming out of the darkness and fog like a wraith. Long black hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail, none the worse for wear even in the rain. The woman kept her weapon trained on Emma and Ruth, but slowly worked her way back over the terrain. It didn’t take long before she spotted the dead man. Cold and emotionless, the woman knelt beside the body and took something from his inside jacket pocket before she stood and put her weapon away. Whatever she had taken from Carlotti went into the pocket of her cargo pants.

“I don’t kill unless I get paid.”

The next thing Ruth knew, they were alone. She rushed over to Emma, dropping to her knees in a puddle of water. One look at the pain on her face told Ruth the news wasn’t good.

“Where?”

Emma appeared suddenly exhausted. Her eyes slipped closed and then fluttered open. “My shoulder.”

In the darkness with soaked clothing, Ruth had trouble spotting the injury. When she did, she gasped in horror. Blood covered the upper left side of Emma’s chest. The backpack strap on that side was frayed from the round passing through. Instinct made Ruth press down on the wound with palm of her hand in an attempt to stop the blood flow.

Emma cried out and fell against her and Ruth jerked her hand back as though scalded.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. Oh, God. Now what?”

“We still have to get out of this storm,” Emma muttered in tones so low Ruth had to lean forward to hear.

Ruth slipped her arm around Emma’s waist and helped her to her feet. She was dismayed by how Emma’s knees buckled with every step they took, but recognized the need to find shelter. They didn’t want to wind up like Carlotti. The pack hindered Emma’s movement and Ruth worried it added to her pain so she stopped long enough to remove the burden. Ruth slipped the pack over her own shoulders and then slung Emma’s right arm around her neck. She started in the direction Emma had previously encouraged her to travel. Ruth was more frightened at

Emma's condition than she had ever been in her life. Even running from Henry, kidnapped by Carlotti's men and then chased into the woods couldn't compare.

"Where to?" Emma didn't answer. "Come on, Marshal Blake. Wake up. Tell me where we're going."

Emma shook her head and appeared to focus, but Ruth didn't know how long that would last. She held her left arm tight against her body. "Through there," she answered, nodding toward the woods.

Chapter Twenty

A HULKING SHAPE came slowly into view, darker even than the surrounding woods. Ruth tugged Emma toward the structure, at times half dragging her. She pulled Emma through the doorway, greeted by the usual stench of a park's barely cleaned bathroom. Ruth was just grateful to be out of the storm. She tugged Emma over to one wall and helped her to sit on the cold tiles. Emma leaned back against the wall while Ruth removed the backpack and set it to the side. Outside, the rain still pelted down, the noise loud as it echoed through the bathroom.

Ruth knelt between Emma's knees, clasping a cold hand between her own. She chaffed the flesh, trying to impart some warmth. Emma's eyes had closed as soon as she sat.

"Open your eyes, Emma. I need you to talk to me. You have to stay awake."

Emma complied somewhat reluctantly. Her lips appeared dry despite her being drenched by the storm. "When did you get so forceful?"

The words were weak, but Ruth felt encouraged by the attempt at humor. "Must be your sparkling personality rubbing off on me. I need to look at your wound. Can you help me?" Maybe she could keep Emma conscious if she got her moving and talking.

Emma reached up to unbutton her shirt, but her hand fell weakly back to her side. She seemed to grow more frail every passing moment. Ruth took over, trying to hide her worry.

"Here, let me get that. Were you able to get hold of anyone?"

Ruth removed Emma's jacket before she unfastened the shirt and pushed it away from Emma's wound. A black hole punched through her body between the arm and chest. The wound was deep red and angry around the edges, but had stopped bleeding. Ruth looked at the back of Emma's shoulder and found a larger exit wound. Blood streamed down her back in a steady flow. She thought rainwater might make the volume seem greater than it really was.

"Yeah, Waield sent a team toward us as soon as he found out they were tracking us."

Ruth froze in surprise. "How'd he know?"

"Terry. Long story."

Speaking took a lot out of Emma, but Ruth had to keep her talking. She was concerned that if assistance didn't arrive soon, Emma would die from either shock or blood loss. The thought of those sweet blue eyes closing forever brought a lump to her throat that Ruth had difficulty swallowing past. With a realization that was as staggering as it was unexpected, Ruth acknowledged her past feelings for Jordan were truly superficial. What lingered was the sting of her betrayal and Ruth's own guilt for killing her. That was as it should be.

Her growing emotions for Emma were a different matter entirely. The danger from Carlotti was over and Ruth wanted to believe that she and Emma could explore their undeniable attraction. In order for that to happen, she had to keep Emma alive.

"We need to stop the bleeding. I have to remove your shirt so I can use it to apply pressure."

Ruth started to suit her words to actions, but Emma stopped her. She shook her head and said, "There's a first-aid kit in the bag."

Why hadn't she thought of that before? Ruth had known of the emergency supplies Emma hauled around with her. The Girl Scout motto "be prepared" paled in comparison to Emma's careful planning. Feeling like an idiot, Ruth unclipped the flap and dug inside the wet canvas. The first-aid kit had migrated to the bottom along with another hard object. Ruth identified the handgun by feel. She removed it from the rucksack and placed it on the floor beside her...just in case.

After withdrawing and opening the medical kit, Ruth spotted a large bandage sealed in plastic. The label offered the reassuring words "compression bandage." She tore open the packet and turned to find Emma watching her.

"I'm sorry, but this is going to hurt."

"It's okay. Is the bullet still in?"

"I don't think so. There's a big hole in the back."

Emma nodded her head. "That's good. Go ahead, I can take it."

Her accent was more pronounced and Ruth realized it came through strongest when she was tired or hurt. Ruth found it endearing. It also provided a topic of conversation that might prove a distraction. Leaning close, Ruth steeled herself to inflict more pain on her stalwart protector.

"You never told me where you're from."

"Georgia. Savannah, actually."

Emma pronounced the word "Jo-jah." Ruth smiled and then grimaced as Emma tensed. She pressed against the wound in the back with her palm while looping the bandage under Emma's armpit with the other hand. She wrapped it tightly to apply more pressure.

"A southern girl, I knew it." Ruth affixed the bandage in place. She took a sling from the kit and slipped Emma's arm into it. "What made you join the Marshal Service? Don't you get tired of protecting bad guys?"

While she waited for Emma to answer, Ruth covered the re-opened abdominal wound. She couldn't do anything about the stitches, but she could prevent anything more from getting into it. That was when she noticed Emma's hands. Ruth inspected her palms. Red and raw, the injuries resembled rope burn. She shook her head and wound gauze around them until Emma could get checked out at a hospital.

"Most people aren't bad. They're just witnesses to bad things. Besides, if not me then who?"

Ruth finished her task and gazed thoughtfully at Emma. She seemed so weary and had dark circles under her eyes. In the time they'd known one another Emma had been ambushed, shot by her own partner and pushed Ruth aside to take the bullet meant to kill her. Throughout their entire ordeal, Emma had never once complained. She really was extraordinary.

Along with awareness, Ruth felt some of the ice encasing her heart tear loose. The cold was created by all the recent duplicity, a barrier protecting her from danger and heartbreak. Emma thawed the snow deep within, even in her fragile condition. Perhaps, precisely because of it.

Who guards the guardian? Ruth wondered. In this instance, she did. Ruth realized Emma had started shivering and worried she was going into shock. She quickly refastened Emma's shirt. The jacket was too wet and lightweight to do much good so she delved back into the go-bag. Emma's suit jacket was crusted in dried blood but at least it was fairly dry.

Ruth sat down beside Emma, ensuring the pistol was within easy reach. Then she spread it over Emma and pulled her against her side.

"Relax against me, baby. Let me warm you up."

She felt the smile against her neck and pulled away just enough to see Emma's expression.

"Baby? And here I thought you didn't like me much."

“Oh, I like you fine,” Ruth admitted. “Just don’t expect me to eat pork crackling, whatever that is.”

“How about grits?” Emma teased.

“Yuck,” Ruth responded, unable to tear her gaze away from full lips so near her own.

“Biscuits and gravy?”

“Sounds promising.”

“Mashed potatoes and black-eyed...”

Ruth couldn’t resist the temptation any longer. She captured Emma’s lips in a kiss as searing as it was tender. Softly, slowly, she tasted Emma’s sweetness. She easily remembered the familiar tingling sensation generated in her stomach the first time they’d kissed. This was so much more intense. Emma’s lips parted, encouraging Ruth to deeper passion.

When it finally ended, Ruth put her hand on Emma’s cheek and encouraged her to rest against her shoulder. The driving desire to continue what she’d started gave way to the urge to take care of Emma.

“Does this mean you’d be willing to go out with me sometime? Now that Carlotti’s dead, you’re free to go back to your normal life.”

“I might be persuaded, but you have to do something for me.”

Emma sighed dramatically, but Ruth thought it was more for effect than anything. “You always have a condition. Fine, what is it?”

“Stop getting hurt.”

“I think I can do that.”

They sat together for the next half hour, sharing body heat. Ruth stroked Emma’s damp hair and felt her breathing even out. She allowed Emma to sleep now, sure that she wouldn’t bleed to death. Eventually, the storm abated. The thunder died away to an occasional, but distant crash before vanishing altogether. The rain slowed and then stopped. Ruth couldn’t hear it hitting the building anymore.

It was time to leave their sanctuary. She dreaded forcing Emma into motion, but she needed medical assistance. Easing away, Ruth donned the backpack before waking Emma.

“Wake up, sweetheart. Let’s get you out of here.”

Emma was groggy at first, but gamely attempted to stand. She fell back on her butt so Ruth helped her up. Ruth slid the jacket over Emma’s right arm and left shoulder before retrieving the pistol. Once they got back to the motel, Ruth would use her cell phone to call an ambulance.

The motel wasn’t far from the restroom facilities. Emma helped Ruth find the way back, but it was slow going. Ruth’s feet squished in her sneakers and now that they were safe, she discovered she was famished. First order of business was an ambulance, then dry clothes and food.

Unexpectedly, a beam of light hit Ruth in the face. Recent events made her raise the pistol without thought.

“U.S. Marshals. Don’t move.”

“SO THAT’S THE end of it,” Alan Waild said. “We retrieved three bodies from the motel and surrounding woods, but there was no sign of the woman.”

Emma sat propped up in the hospital bed speaking with her supervisor. Still groggy from the surgery, she couldn’t quite see his eyes behind the black frames of his glasses. A large, bulky

bandage covered her left shoulder and the stitches in her abdomen were replaced. Medical staff had eschewed the need to wrap her hands, insisting the minor abrasions would fare better with fresh air. The hospital gown concealed the stomach wound, but Emma noticed that her supervisor's gaze wandered frequently to her shoulder.

As usual, he wore an impeccable three-piece suit. To his credit, Waield hadn't faltered at the sight of Ruth occupying the chair beside Emma, holding her hand.

"What about the ledger?"

"With irrefutable proof of Carlotti's activities, in the form of his dead body, we obtained a search warrant. The book was right where you said it was. It'll take time to analyze, but preliminary indications are that he kept extensive records. A lot of high level criminal enterprises are about to fall."

"That's good news, sir."

"Well, I'll let you get some rest. You've done a great job here, Marshal Blake. You too, Ms. Gallagher. I want to thank you for what you've done. I know it can't have been easy."

Ruth didn't reply, but Waield didn't seem to expect it. Ever the classy guy, he made sure to pull the door completely closed as he made his exit. Emma squeezed Ruth's hand.

"You're awfully quiet. Flashbacks about hospital rooms?"

Ruth smiled. "At least this time someone else is lying in the bed. No offense."

"None taken. Listen, I'll be off duty for a while until my shoulder heals. Is it too early to ask you to have dinner with me when I get out of here?"

"Grits and biscuits and gravy?"

Emma laughed, vaguely recalling that conversation. "You forgot the mashed potatoes and black-eyed peas."

"I'll tell you what. Why don't I worry about making all the dinners for the next little while?"

Ruth leaned closer and Emma gulped, reading the desire in her eyes. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. In fact, if you want, I'd like it if you stayed with me until you're feeling better."

There was no chance Emma could refuse. "I'd like that."

"Good, because it's my turn to watch over you."

About the Author

S. Y. Thompson resides with her menagerie of animals. She fills her days with writing and playing with her Yorkie and six cats.

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Under the Midnight Cloak

Lee Grayson is a nature photographer whose father is a senator in New York. She's never felt close to him and her faith in people as a whole is lacking. She moves to the town of Harmon deep in the Adirondack Mountains after inheriting her great aunt's estate, but the local townspeople seem a little...off. Then she meets Ranger Jamison Kessler and learns there's a killer running rampant around the area. Jamison seems to be hiding things from her and Lee is starting to become suspicious.

Lee discovers that her aunt was a central part of this community and that she possesses the woman's unique abilities. She and Jamison are falling for each other, but things take a turn for the worse when the murderer sets his sights on Lee and a cure for his condition which he believes her to be harboring. Their situation is further complicated by the fact that the killer isn't even human. Neither is Jamison

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Jamison, Lee and the Panthera rush to save the lives of the innocent while they struggle to identify the instrument of so much suffering. Strains in relationships cloud their ability to see the whole picture. At the same time, U. S. Park Police Detective Patricia Hex shows up to help out but may soon become a threat to the Panthera community. Jamison's concentration splits

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issue. This same woman, Sidney Weaver, is a warm, personable and accomplished actress that Ronan would give her life to protect.

Unaware of what fate has in store, Sidney's life is boringly predictable until a mysterious stranger comes out of the darkness of night to protect her. She knows there's something unusual about Ronan, but despite her misgivings, she can't deny the mutual attraction. All of this takes a backseat when she's plunged into a harrowing game of cat and mouse that could destroy everything she holds dear.

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Carson is an awe-inspiring woman by anyone's standards. Possessing genius-level intelligence that has allowed her to become a self-made millionaire of a computer software company, Carson still has a dark secret that could be her undoing.

When the two are thrust together to escape a deadly killer in a high-rise office building while a blizzard rages outside, they have no one to count on but each other. So begins an unexpected yet tender romance. However, unchecked love and desire isn't in their future. The murderer is still out there and he's coming for them. Will Carson's street-wise skills protect them both as Erin attempts to discover the killer's identity just as relentlessly as he is seeking their demise?

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Now Emily is among the hunted. Her only hope is Sheriff Jenna Yang from Woeful Pines, Kentucky. Unfortunately, Emily and Jenna hardly know each other. Will Jenna even realize Emily is missing? If she does, will Jenna be willing to risk everything to cross into an unknown land and face enduring hardship to rescue a virtual stranger?

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by Kate McLachlan

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if the blogger discovers their relationship. She has to find a way to watch her back and keep Dayna and her friends and family safe from the blogger's large audience and prying eyes, even as he dogs her every move.

From Albuquerque to El Paso, Chris is on the trail of a killer who seems to be able to disappear into the cultures on either side of the border, like a ghost or desert wind. Those along the border protect their own, Chris knows, but she has a job to do, even as she draws closer and realizes that sometimes, things aren't what they seem.

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