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CHAPTER ONE

Daytona, Florida
February 14

The edges of her vision blurred. Her heart thudded hard against her ribs. She couldn't panic, not here in the main isle of the stable. "No, not again," Lena moaned. She had to get to her bedroom this time. From her office doorway she managed to walk to the wide doorway of the stable. Time seemed to slow, became a thick syrupy substance she had to swim through with every movement of her body, while consciously she was being sucked in to a huge empty void to float weightless without control of mind and body.

She gained the back porch each step painfully slow and made it to the three doors blocking her path to the inner depths of safety, screen door, solid heavy Oak backdoor, and then the interior mud room door, leading into the kitchen. Using everything as a life line, from furniture to walls to tables, within reach of her path to the stairway, she managed the daunting trip in a fully upright position. Grasping the banister she leaned heavily against it, and hand over hand she pulled her-self up to the top of the stairs. Her body screamed in agony for her to just let go. Knees locked; panting from the exertion she braced herself against the wall on the right side of the stairs.

She was almost there, only fifty feet to go, her vision now down to a tiny pin point of clear perception, the rest, a smudged impression of shapes and colors. The voice that only she could hear was back, "*Let go we must protect our sisters, this is your destiny Dream Walker. Join with me and the pain will ease. Our sisters need our help.*" Lena had steadily ignored the nagging voice for the last two days. Had wished it would just go away and bug someone else. *What was a Dream Walker?* She didn't understand why this was happening to her.

Lena stumbled through her bedroom doorway like a drunk, this time she was determined to make it to her bed. Her leg muscles were on fire and trembled from the strain, ready to give up the fight to hold her up. The last time, some months ago, she had only made it to the back porch before losing consciousness. The fourth time this had happen.

For the last two days Lena had had what felt like a big steal ball of Dread lodged in her stomach. The sickening weight of it was all too familiar. She knew this was the fifth time, but would it be the same? *God she hoped not.* For two of the longest days of her life Lena refused to sleep, refused to dream, and was determined to ignore the nagging persistent voice that wouldn't shut up or go away. The battle between conscious mind and sub-consciousness felt like it was killing her.

Pain knifed through her skull dropping her to her knees. No longer able to see anything, her hands flailing out in front as her upper body lurched forward in search of the bed and safety as she went down. And with a whisper of a touch her fingertips barely brushed the comforter covering the side of the bed. Nooooo! Lena tried to scream as the upper part of her body hit the floor with a hard thud.

Lena Matthews wondered if she would ever get used to the violent beginning and end of the trip. Oh, this wasn't one of those trips where she would find herself laying swathed in a barely there bikini on some tropical island with a foreign name like Tahiti. No, this trip like the other four was dark. Swathed and stinking of evil. She waited for the horror to begin and could only wonder if she had made it on to the bed this time.

The black thick-as-pea-soup fog cleared along with the blank numbness of her mind and Lena found herself, reclining in an unknown vehicle in the passenger seat. She searched the landscape visible through the windshield for something familiar. Everything she could see passing them, the buildings and palm trees, the manicured lawns of both business and residential were all familiar, but from where? And why, when she tried to turn her head and look at the driver, she was unable to.

She strained to understand the soft muted sounds of voices. Nothing, she couldn't understand a thing being said. Lena glanced down at her lap and wiggled her fingers. They didn't move. What

the hell was going on? Still focused on moving her fingers, the left hand, *her left hand*, suddenly lifted, *I'm not doing this*, and brushed fingers across her forehead. She didn't feel it. Oh, hell! Okay, so she was here in a sense. *Dream Walker!* Was she sitting on someone?

Lena looked down and tried to shift the legs. Nothing, yes she was sitting in someone. The slacks covering the legs were not hers, did not look like anything she would wear. The sensation of the vehicles movement coming to a halt made her look up.

Her head turned to the right. Lena could see a walk way that lead to the front door of a house. The passenger door opened, the body occupying the same space as she turned in the seat and stood, dragging her with it. "No. No, don't go in. I don't want to go in with you. Please, leave me here." Lena begged and screamed. And got no response, nor did she make a sound; it all seemed to be stuck in her mind ricocheting off her skull.

The trips reminded her of the only two days she had spent in the ROTC class her senior year. Sergeant Miller, a first class asshole, Lena had discovered the truth to only a few minute unimportant things. She would have sworn, to any and all, she was physically fit. Then Sgt. Miller bellowed, "Drop and give me fifty. Now!" At twenty the muscles in her arms wept in agony and burned. At thirty, she was screaming and cussing Sgt. A-hole Miller in her mind. At thirty-three, she dropped like lead brick and couldn't feel her arms. Then she started to revise how physically fit she was. And did she care to be that physically fit? No, she did not thank you very much. She laid there panting with her heart trying to claw its way through her chest, Lena fervently wished Sgt. Miller would trip over his own two big feet.

Deciding she'd had enough for this class period Lena rolled over on to her left side just in time to see Sgt. Miller's left foot turn inward and the toe of his shoe catch on his right heel, causing him to go down. It all seemed to happen in slow motion. Much to her surprise, he caught himself and looked ready to do push-ups with them. Lena glanced around at the other twenty students grunting and groaning their way through to fifty. Her eyes locked with Jessica's, three bodies over, and she burst out laughing.

Yes, those two-one hour classes were hell on earth. But then years before, Lena didn't really believe in hell or evil. There was good and bad, yes. But Hell and evil, come on this is the twenty-first century. Well, over the last two years she had revised those thoughts also.

A phantom floating along. A second shadow, a Dream Walker, she didn't want to be either. The front door opened. "Welcome to Hell on Earth!" Lena yelled, as she stepped through the door way, and heard nothing. She could feel the vile presence of something evil, prodding and poking at her back, herding her and whomever she was shadowing forward. Off the entryway on both sides there were large open doorways leading to other rooms, passing them, they continued to walk farther into the house. Veering off to the right, she began the climb of a long wide staircase that curved up and to the left hugging the wall.

She needed to focus on the dark presence behind her. Lena tried to turn her head in both directions and found she could just barely move to see if there was an actual person or thing. Straining, Lena tried to look over each shoulder. There over her left shoulder in the blurry bit of peripheral vision she could just make out a smudged fuzzy image before her neck muscles started to cramp in protest.

Even smudged and fuzzy the image was very familiar. The march continued on and at the landing they, her phantom self and the person she was shadowing, went right a couple of steps and stopped. The little alcove led to the master bedroom. The door opened soundlessly and they entered.

Lena could feel the cold on her skin. No. Not her skin. Still she actually felt the bitter cold temperature of the room.

In the center of the room stood a raised king size four poster bed. She held her breath. She went to the left and entered the master bath. Movement at her waist had her looking down in disbelief. The belt unfastened, hook and zipper came unfastened. She watched in horror as all of the clothes slid silently to the floor, everything, bra, thong. Gone, all gone. "Damn it put that stuff back on!" Lena screamed. No sound. Oh, Hell! A creamy white satin robe appeared and then was put on and loosely belted at the waist.

They turned together, leaving the bathroom and walked toward the huge bed. Lena tried to step back, dig in her heels and lock her

knees, willing the other person and herself to go no further. They walked forward the last two steps. Climbing the single step that led up to the bed, they turned and sat on the edge of the mattress.

Lena looked up. Her body lay back on the bed, her head resting on the pillow and what she saw was worse than any horror flick, or anything imaginable. She sucked in a lung full of air and screamed for all she was worth. "Nooooo, you bastard. Mama, help meeee! She tried to move, to roll, yank free and get up and run. She felt the pressure, like a ton of bricks were piled on top of her, holding her down.

The robe, unbelted now, parted down the center. Lena watched the smudged figure raise its hand high directly over her chest. As it came down, she could make out the shape of a strange looking knife. "*Too late, Dream Walker for we have lost another sister.*" The voice whispered. The knife plunged home, straight through the center of her heart, as if she were made of thin shear tissue instead of skin and bone. Lena tried to focus on the spot where she thought the eyes should be.

Too late! The dark veil swathed over and around ripping the Dream Walker from its charge.

St. Augustine, Florida
February 17

Another dead end, literally, but he'd had to come down in person to check things out. They, every police department involved and the FBI were missing something, overlooking some small shred of evidence to make the connection, five crime scenes and zero DNA and/or fingerprints.

Gary Wellington reviewed the only pertinent facts, in his mind, everyone had. Two years. He knew there was something else, some small detail that linked the murders that no one had thought relevant enough to check. The only things linking the murders from South Carolina to Florida was a lovely or use-to-be lovely early-fifties dead widow with some sort of knife wound to the heart and a long-stemmed red rose.

Arriving late afternoon on the seventeenth, at the Shores Inn, Gary checked in at the front desk then drove down the lot to the parking space directly in front of his room. He parked in the space, shut off the Jag and pulled the key from the ignition switch, while taking in the outer facade of the small American owned beach front Inn. The other nineteen rooms seemed to be occupied also, ten at ground level and ten stacked on top. After carrying his suitcase and brief case inside, Gary unpacked the two changes of clothes he had brought with him.

The restless urge he always felt when hunting a killer settled over him. He knew this would mean a sleepless night was all he had to look forward to while he waited to hear from the captain of the St. Augustine Police Department.

Standing on the beach a short distance from the open patio doors to his room, a few feet from the waves that were rolling in, his hands shoved in the back pockets of his jeans. Gary looked out over the ocean to the horizon. Waiting for the sun to rise, he let the salty wind coming in off the Atlantic clear the last of the dark misty nightmare away. Hearing the phone ring inside his room and at the same time his cell started ringing. "Shit, what now." He

jogged back to his room and grabbed the cell phone off the patio table and answered it on the fourth ring. "Wellington."

"Mr. Wellington, this is Captain Anderson with St. Augustine P.D., I just got your message that you would like to meet with me. If you'd come by the station 'bout an hour, I've 'bout fifteen minutes free, before a meeting."

"I'll be there." Gary flipped the cell shut ending the call and headed back into the motel room. Rubbing at the tension that seemed to ride his shoulders for the last two years, he poured coffee from the carafe, compliments of the Inn, into a mug on the small table. The scent of roasted coffee beans filled his nose Gary groaned. "Thank God for this little bit of room service."

Gary opened the St. Augustine newspaper room service had left beside the coffee carafe. Front-page headlines read THE EAST COAST LOVER KILLS AGAIN. Further it states, "Three days ago, Marie McMillon found Julia McMillon, her mother, dead in her home. Julia McMillon is the fifth victim of the East Coast Lover." Laying the newspaper next to his suitcase to take with him when he left the Inn, forgetting the coffee he had just poured, Gary dressed for his meeting with Captain Anderson.

"Mr. Wellington, come in, come in. How can I help you?" Captain Anderson shifted his bulky weight in the leather chair, making it squeak in protest.

"I'm hoping you'll let me speak with the detective in charge of the McMillon case, sir?" Gary knew it was a long shot before he had arrived in St. Augustine, Florida, last night. Wearing a black Armani suit with a pale gray shirt and a tie the color of dark storm clouds that matched his eyes, he sat across from the captain with an unblinking stare, waiting for an answer.

The Captain folded his stubby fingers together over the paper, in front of him on his desk. Andersons first thought after taking in the sight of the young man sitting across from him, Cop plain as day. Though the Armani suit, was a puzzle. The questions were, from where did he come and why did he want to speak with the detective about an ongoing investigation? Anderson decided to give Wellington the usual brush off, "Investigation is still ongoing Mr. Wellington." He did wonder though, Hmm, the boy looks familiar even with the hard cold stare. "Where are you from, Mr.

Wellington? You look familiar, but I can't place where I know you from."

"Atlanta Georgia, sir." With an inward sigh, Gary figured the big burly bastard wasn't going to give an inch on the McMillon case.

"Homicide, Atlanta P.D., I've been tracking The East Coast Lover for two years."

"Yes, that's it, Detective Wellington. Your mother was one of the victims." Captain Anderson looked toward the closed office door when someone knocked, "Excuse me," and bellowed out, "Come in."

The office door swung open. "Sorry for the interruption, sir, you wanted to see me."

Holding his hand up, Anderson motioned for the detective to wait. He cast a hooded glance at the man sitting across from him.

"Mr. Wellington, I'm afraid our time is up. I have a press conference to attend to." Gary stood, at the same time Anderson heaved his bulky body up out of his leather chair and picked up the press release file. "I'll speak to your captain and let you know if I can help you."

"I'll be waiting for your call, sir, you have my cell number."

Gary walked by, nodding to the detective still standing just inside the office doorway. Thinking to himself, you can bet your ass I won't be sitting around doing nothing. But when he walked through the bullpen, past the desks the detectives used, he could smell the scent of stale coffee hanging in the air and the sound of fingers tick-tacking out reports on the keyboards of their computer. Gary wasn't surprised by the faint stirring of nostalgia.

Back outside, Gary pulled his cell out to call Stevens. While he waited for the call to connect, he noticed a crowd forming across the street. About fifty people or so had gathered near a big white gazebo. He pressed the cell phone tighter to his ear so he could hear Stevens when he answered.

"Stevens." Hearing his best friend bark into the phone always had a smile tugging at the corners of Gary's lips. Ben Stevens, an ex-cop/partner and more of a brother and friend since elementary school.

"Stevens, its Wellington."

"What's up, Gary?"

"I'm returning your call. Tell me you have something other than a dead body and a long-stemmed red rose and I'll give you a big bonus." Gary could feel it in his gut that he was close. The something unknown to them all, the one small detail that may not blow the case wide open, but would give them a focal point. A direction leading to the killer. The turning point for the case, and catching his mother's killer.

"What kind of big bonus are we talking about? White sandy beaches. Babes from Land O'Legs and lots of water extending out from the sand. You know, I could really get in to this. It's fifty-five degrees here in Atlanta."

"Depends on what you have for me?" A game they often played, and usually he didn't mind, but today the questions grated some. Wasting time was what it felt like.

"I have a credit card and the billing address."

"Don't joke with me on this, Stevens." He growled into the little phone. Gary's entire body tightened, going rigid at the mention of a solid lead. Stevens had been playing a lot of jokes on him the last few months, mostly setting up blind dates that Gary knew nothing about, and sending the strange women to his house.

"No joke, same credit card was used for payment at the three different restaurants for the last three victims." Jogging across the street to check out why the crowd had gathered. Gary stopped on the sidewalk to look around for a place at the back of the crowd to stand. "You also said you had an address?"

"The billing address is in Daytona, Florida. It's possible the credit card is stolen. It was used to make dinner reservations for the last three victims in Charleston, South Carolina, Atlanta, Georgia and St. Augustine, Florida." Finally, he had a lead to sink his teeth into. The only real lead so far.

"What's the address, Stevens?" He asked in a low voice.

"1001 Main Street Daytona, Florida. You going, if so you should have back up in case the credit card is not stolen."

Leaning against a giant oak with its Spanish moss-covered branches, Gary noticed eleven different news stations and reporters had arrived. Four local TV station vehicles equipped for live feed. A couple he hadn't heard of and the rest along with CNN from farther abroad. He kept to the back of the crowd so he could listen to some of the conversations going on in front of him. "I'll meet

you at the Daytona International Airport tomorrow morning, be sure to pack enough clothes. We might be there for a while. Oh, and stop by my place and grab my other suit case. It's already packed." Gary said.

"You got it. I'll call you with the flight information."

He put the cell on vibrate and slipped it in his front pocket. Gary searched the growing crowd of reporters mixed with civilians and a few police officers. The people driving by in their cars on Hwy A-1A were slowing trying to see what was going on at the town square. Watching the Captain make his way up the gazebo steps, Gary thought to himself, Don't tap on the microphone, no. *Eeeerrrrrrrr*. "Too late!" He muttered. There is no quicker way to get everyone's attention than a loud ear piercing screech.

"Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for being patient. This morning's press release will be short and to the point. The McMillon case is still ongoing, and it is too early into the investigation to state that Mrs. McMillon is the East Coast Lover's latest victim. Be patient, St. Augustine's finest are on this. Thank you for coming and have a good day." Turning from the microphone, Captain Anderson ignored the questions hurled at his back and walked across the street and back inside with the detective in tow. They both disappeared through the doors of the police station. Everyone around the Gazebo began to voice their negative thoughts concerning the Captain's lack of information in the press release.

Listening to the snippets of conversations going on around him, Gary leaned against the oak tree, hoping to get some tidbit of information he had not already heard or read. The cell phone buzzed and vibrated softly in his pocket jarring his attention from the crowd. "Wellington" Gary said, more mildly than usual, recognizing the Captains number. He figured Anderson had seen him standing at the back of the crowd.

"Wellington, get your ass in my office now! I know you're standing out there under that damn Oak tree!" Click!

Holding the cell out to see the display he smiled, his dimples winking at the corners of his lips. "Big burly bastard hung up on me." He shut and clipped the cell back onto his belt, smiling. Gary felt like laughing. He entered the front doors of the police station again. There had been precious little that he had felt like laughing

about in the last two years. But, it had been even longer since anyone had barked orders at him.

At the front desk, Gary leaned on the counter while waiting for the red headed woman answering the phones to finish her call. When she turned, he was still smiling. "Hello, I'm Gary Wellington, here to see Captain Anderson."

"I'll let him know you're here." She said in a low voice, "Again." Staring at the gorgeous man in front of her, she made the call without taking her eyes off him. Pressing one for the captain's line, "Sir, Mr. Wellington's here," Hhmmm. "Yes sir." She hung up the phone, "You can go right in, do you know the way?" She asked with a smile of her own.

"Yes ma'am I do, thank you." Gary winked at her and walked past her desk.

"Anytime, any time at all." Sighing, she patted her chest.

He noticed several more detectives were at their desks than there had been earlier that morning. Hooking the visitors badge to the collar of his jacket, Gary nodded to the Detective four desks up ahead, facing him on his right, when he looked up. The guy sitting in the hot seat wearing cuffs, across from the same Detective suddenly shifted his weight to the balls of his feet and jumped up from his chair, yelling, "I'll beat that bitch to a bloody pulp again if she presses charges, stupid whoring bitch."

Before Gary had taken another step the big guy lunged at the Detective questioning him and knocked everything off the desk except for the computer monitor. Wrapped his cuffed wrists behind the Detectives neck and was pulling him forward to head butt him right in the face. In two quick strides Gary, his weapon in his left hand, stood just behind the big man's left side.

The big man reared back his head, jammed his big meaty thumbs under the Detectives lower jaw bone, to make good on his intentions. Before he started forward something poked him hard on his big shoulder. He stopped and growled. He turned quickly to see who was gonna get their face smashed next. The face smasher stopped short, and stared cross-eyed at the cold-steel business end of a nine-millimeter gun pressed snugly to the end of his nose.

Gary pushed the end of the man's big bulbous nose just a hair to the right so he had a firm grasp on I-mean-business. Towering over

the big man, he explained to the offensive asshole what would happen next and the choices at hand. "This is going to be a bad day for you if you don't take your hands off Slim here." Leaning down inches from the meatheads face, Gary stared him in the eye. He put a little more pressure on the end of the assholes nose with the barrel of the gun. He let some of the violent emotions, he had held in check for the last two years, dust his voice making it sound hard and growling. "After you do that, I want to hear you apologize to Slim here for your shitty behavior in this fine establishment, and then you'll apologize to ladies here for your shitty mouth." Gary's body was so tense, every muscle coiled to spring, ready for action, straining for release. The rage so long held in check wanting, needing an outlet. The beast within barely tethered now by a tightly bound leash.

He felt the big burly man slowly shift forward, lift his arms up, and release the skinny detective. Gary stared him in the eye and barked, "Now, the apology!" One kinda asshole Gary could not stand. The abusive kind, the bastards really set him-off.

Staring, the big man stuttered at first. "I...I apologize for my behavior and my language." Sweat beads slid down the side of the man's thick muscled neck, beaded on his brow to slide down unnoticed into his eyes. Without taking his eyes off the big bastard, Gary let him know by the cold deadly glare of his eyes that it could very well mean his death.

"Now you'll sit there like you're told or I'll be back, do you understand."

"Ye...yes sir."

Slipping the gun back into its leather sheath under his jacket, Gary looked at the skinny Detective. "I'll be in with the Captain if you need any more help with him." Then he turned, his glare slide over each of the five officers gathered around him to his left. Gary locked eyes with the officer closest to him, only four feet away, pointing a .38 at his chest, and cocked his left eyebrow in question.

"You need to hand over that gun sir, real slow like."

He glanced at the officer's nametag. "Officer Jones, that's not going to happen, had you been paying attention to your surroundings, I would not have pulled my gun out and showed this asshole here how pretty it is up close and personal like. Now would I?"

Out of the corner of his eye, Gary could see Captain Anderson standing in the doorway to his office. Mentally he heaved a frustrated sigh, and reeled in his anger. "Officer Jones, you need to put your .38 away, so we can all get back to work, I don't think your Captain likes us just standing around chewing the fat." He raised his other eyebrow. "Actually, he looks like he's about to blow a gasket any second." He commented as he nodded toward the big man in uniform.

"Jones, Wellington my office, Now!" Anderson bellowed, knowing his orders will be obeyed or else, he turned back into his office and slammed the door shut behind him.

"Does he yell all the time?" Gary asked.

Securing his gun, Officer Jones gave Gary a killing look, "Yes he bellows all the time, let's go or there'll be hell to pay." He answered. He knocked on the captain's door before entering with the Gary on his heels.

"You wanted to see me sir?" Officer Jones said. Gary thought the poor guy looked ready to click his heels together and salute any second.

"You just pointed your gun at a fellow officer, Detective actually and he won't be handing over his gun either. Now tell me what the hell happened out there, Wellington you go first?" The Captain snapped.

Occupying the same chair, he had sat in an hour before. Gary slouched in the seat this time with his fingers linked together across his broad chest and stared the Captain dead in the eye. "On my way to your office the big meat head jumped up, wrapped his cuffed wrists around Slim's neck, the detective doing the interview or whatever he was doing. From the looks of it, he was fixing to get his face bashed in by a head butt. So I politely told the big guy that he would take his hands off Slim and apologize."

"Officer Jones?"

"Yes sir, that's just the way it happened, I was one step behind Wellington." The officer said shooting a hot glare at Gary slouched in the chair.

The captain leaned further back in his chair making it creak under his big frame, and drummed his fingers on the edge of the desk. "Just so you both know, I saw the whole thing myself, that'll be all Officer Jones." Anderson waited for Jones to leave and close the

door behind him before looking back at Wellington. The man, Wellington, was just plain creepy, staring at him without a blink or a movement with dark smoky eyes. "I can tell you, Mr. Wellington your Captain in Atlanta isn't happy you're here, he gave me the run down on your file and it's quite impressive to say the least."

Hoping to cut through the speech and get right to the point of the meeting, Gary cut to the chase. "So what can you tell me about the McMillon case?" He knew there would be nothing unless the killer had changed his M.O.

"Not much, Mrs. McMillon turned 50 years old last November, a widower with four children, two girls and two boys. Her oldest daughter, Maria McMillon found her. From what the daughter says, she came back to her mother's house around eleven p.m. They were going to have a glass of wine and her mother was going to tell her about the wonderful date she went on. Maria unfortunately did not get a name beforehand. She said her mother had been seeing the same man for about a month. Julia would never tell her his name she only said she was spending some time with a nice charming gentleman. I'm expecting the autopsy report back today."

Still sitting in the same slouched position he had been in when Officer Jones had left the captain's office. Listening intently, the only outward sign of emotion was the whitening of knuckles from gripping his fingers together. Gary cleared his throat, "Where was she, when she was found?"

"She was in her bed wearing a white silk robe, partially open with nothing underneath, and a long-stemmed red rose, placed between her breasts. One knife wound to the heart. I can see I don't have to tell you the answer to that damn reporter's questions. Julia McMillon is the fifth victim of the East Coast Lover. Who the hell came up with that anyway?"

"I have no idea. You have a problem with me talking to the daughter, Maria?"

"No, but you'll have to wait till she comes back to town. The detective you called Slim, his name is Mark Sanders, if he's finished with the wife beater, he'll fill you in on what he can. Remember this is a high profile case so if anything leaks I'll be looking for you with a lot of questions Wellington."

Again, Gary stood the same time the Captain did and shook his out stretched hand. "You won't have to worry sir, I'm leaving town this afternoon and I'll talk to the daughter at a later date. Thanks again for your help."

"No, I should be thanking you, since you saved Sanders face from being smashed."

He stopped by Sanders desk, to get what information he could from him. Which amounted to nothing more than the captain had already said. Since it would be another day or so until the lab reports were completed Gary left his card with Sanders. Back outside, standing on the sidewalk out front, Gary was deciding whether to eat lunch at the little dinner in front of where he had parked next door, order room service or stop somewhere on the way to Daytona. Still undecided, he unclipped the cell to check his voice mail. One message, Stevens voice rang with good humor while he gave his flight info. "Wellington, I'll be there tonight at 6 p.m., I made reservations for our rooms, fill you in when you pick me up at the airport." Click.

"Guess I'm eating on the road." He said, clipped the cell back onto his belt and headed over to the dinner for carry out.

With the top down on the sleek silver Jaguar, the drive to Daytona wasn't bad. A nice breeze was coming in off the ocean, smelling of salty sea-spray, making it a great day for a drive down the coastal-highway A-1. Gary found a little crab shack diner, across the street from the address Stevens had given him earlier, great food and a nice view of the Resort.

Waiting, not so patiently, for Stevens in the baggage claim area of the Daytona, Florida Airport, he heard the flight had finally arrived. The toddler a few seats down sniffled and rubbed his eyes with little clinched fists, and Gary thought, me to buddy, these hard seats make you tired of waiting very quick.

The sound of voices reached him, he looked to his left, then up. At the top of the escalator, Stevens stood surrounded by four women laughing like they were old friends that had finally found each other again. Gary almost snorted out loud, shaking his head in amazement, every time Stevens was within a hundred feet of a group of women; they gravitated toward him and his slow lazy grin. "Quit lying to the ladies, Stevens." Gary said. Stevens looked

down at the little blonde, hanging on to his arm, and smiled at her upturned face.

"It's the god's honest truth ma'am, he shot me twice. I didn't think I was gonna to live." Stevens said with a slow southern drawl, as they stepped off the escalator.

Gary grabbed his other suit case and Stevens luggage off the carousel his self. "Let's roll Stevens, say goodbye to the ladies." He called over his left shoulder heading for the exit doors.

"Bye ladies." Stevens said and ran his finger along the blondes jawbone before releasing her. "Good, to see you too, Wellington. I know you drove by the address I gave you. What is it a run-down motel?" He asked sliding into the passenger seat of the Jaguar, stretching out his long legs, waiting for Gary to give up the information.

"It's a resort and spa, high class place with security guards, doormen and bellboys. All I've seen so far is limo's coming and going. Great little diner across the street called the Crab Shack, excellent seafood and drink. We're going there first to have a beer, sit back and watch."

"I could use the beer. How long are we watching?"

"Maybe, an hour or so why?" Gary said, giving Stevens some of his own back, knowing Stevens hated to fly for any reason.

"We have a reservation there, that's why. I want a shower and a bed, and not necessarily in that order."

"I forgot flying gives you a bad attitude, hour tops. I want to watch the people coming and going. See if anything pops."

Gary parked on the north side of the building next to a candy apple red BMW Z3, the only parking spot left empty. Through the open driver's side window Gary could hear the sound of waves rolling ashore and retreating from across the street on the other side of the big resort called Sun Ray Resort & Spa. They both exited the Jag, and walked over to the open front doors of the dinner. He asked for a table for two out on the front deck.

The streetlights blinked on up and down Main Street. Night settled in with a soft salty breeze coming in off the Atlantic Ocean. They followed the host to a table out on the deck in front of the building. "Here's your table gentlemen; your server will be with you in a moment, enjoy your evening." They sat with their backs to

the wall of window openings with no glass, for an unobstructed view of the resort. "Look across the street." Gary gave a head nod to a stretched glossy white limo turning into the half moon drive of the resort stopping in front of the double glass doors with a guard posted on each side, both dressed in a dark suit. Now, why would they need guards stationed at the front? He found it very interesting.

They watched the door attendant come out to open the door of the limo for the passengers. "High class is right. I wonder who's getting out of that limo." Stevens said.

At the silent appearance of the server, Gary found it hard not to roll his eyes at Stevens. "Good evening gentlemen my name is Sara, I'll be your server tonight," Sara said, while smiling down at Stevens. "What would you like to drink sir?" She asked with her pad and pen ready.

"We'll have a couple of beers and one crab plate, for my friend with stars in his eyes, ma'am." Gary said, before Stevens could answer, and rolled his eyes, making Sara's smile widen.

She winked at the starry-eyed man staring up at her, "An excellent choice sir, I'll have your drinks out in a wink." Turning on her black and silver stilettos with the graceful flowing moves of a long time dancer, black fish net hose caressed every sexy inch of the servers long toned legs, stopping at the hem of a short black mini skirt.

Gary, watched Stevens stare after the server, and wondered if he should have asked for a bib for his friend to catch the drool. "You need to get out more Stevens. You've been here twenty minutes and your already in danger of drowning in your own saliva."

"Maybe I should move down here. Permanently! Damn she's hot."

Gary turned slightly in his chair at the sound of a familiar smoky laugh coming from inside through the windowless opening. The muscles in his stomach jumped, and then tightened. He searched for the woman with a smoky laugh that felt intimately familiar. There. Again, that smoky laugh resounded through him, echoing in his mind, piercing his soul. The sound had haunted his dreams for so long Gary couldn't remember when he had first heard it. She sat at a table, across from the one on the other side of the wall, facing him. The woman from his dreams was real. She was real. Flesh

and blood. Gary blinked several times thinking maybe she was a figment of his very limited imagination. He wondered vaguely if he should ask Stevens to punch him to make damn sure he wasn't dreaming while wide awake. His sight narrowed, searching for some slight difference. His heart thudded hard against his ribs, the same, there was no difference. Her jaw line, identical to the one in his dreams, he had traced it with his fingers, his tongue. The long slender curve of her neck, with her hair down he couldn't see much of it, but he knew it would be the same.

Like a torch burning in the night, a beckon calling to his soul. Finally you've come home. Never, not one second before in his thirty-two years, had he felt the age old primitive need to possess, claim and mark, person or thing. Now, with each second that passed, each breath his lungs struggled for, he felt a great need to beat his chest and bellow. Mine! My woman!

The smoky laugh ripped through him again. A battering ram to a system he thought dead for too long to remember. Her hair long thick the color of a hot flame. Her voice, sultry and smoky, filled his head. Mine! Like a song, humming along his nerve ending. She's real!

He had a job to do, a personal mission to find a killer. He tried to remind himself. He watched the fiery goddess, the Phantom from his dreams through the opening. She stood, dressed in cotton and denim, and looked him straight in the eye. Pinned him to the spot. The conversations going on around him turned into a light buzzing sound in the far off distance. As if they, him and this Phantom of fire, were the only two people. In this space and time. The glossy lush lips of the goddess bowed up in a slight knowing smile. Mine!

Gary heard someone calling his name from a far off distance. A hand appeared in front of his face blocking his view, breaking the trance he was in. "Move. Your. Hand or lose it." He growled, low and hot.

Stevens eyebrows shot up at the sound and he followed Gary's fixed gaze. He was struck just as hard seeing the three women. He snapped his fingers in front of Gary face. "Oh, how the mighty fall. Careful now or you'll lose your soul to that one my friend. The three of them together sure pack a hell of a punch." Stevens tipped his beer in the direction of the three women standing, as a tall distinguished man in a suit walked up to the tall blonde in the

group. The man took her fingers in his hand and brought them to his lips brushing a light kiss over the knuckles of her slender hand.

Gary's mouth was dry as the Sahara desert. He watched the three women and the big man now standing with them. Gulping down some of the beer, he didn't remember the server bringing he tried to clear the mist from his brain, and looked at Stevens. "That was one hell of a trip I just took sitting down." The tight look on Stevens face and tense coiled muscles had Gary glancing back to the trio of women. The blonde was trying to pull her hand from the man now standing between her and the fiery goddess. After freeing her hand the blonde turned to leave. The big man grabbed her by the upper arm, and yanked her back around to face him. Sensing Stevens movement, Gary quickly put a restraining hand on Stevens forearm when he shot up out of his chair. "Wait." He said softly so only Stevens could hear him.

Stevens shrugged trying to dislodge the hand on his arm. "He has two seconds to let her go." He growled. The blonde winced in pain when the man's fingers dug painfully into her upper arm holding her in place. The big man pulled her closer and the other two women moved to stand between their friend and the big man. The fiery goddess was now nose to nose with the man. Gary tightened his hold on Stevens arm, not wanting to bring unwanted attention to them. They both watched and listened, the woman with the flaming hair got in the big man's face.

"You will take your hand off her now and leave, or I will do it for you, Bradley." The fiery goddess said, feet spread, weight balanced, her stance that of a warrior ready to do battle. She issued her demand loud enough for everyone inside, and outside, of the diner to hear. Everyone inside the diner stopped talking and eating almost at once.

All were now spectators. Some hoping for a fight between man and woman or women, physical or verbal it didn't matter as long as there was a scene to fuel the gossip. Some entertainment while they ate their dinner. None of them offered to interfere.

Gary could feel Stevens arm tightening even more; he clenched his fists so tight the knuckles had turned white. Yeah, his buddy Stevens was fixin to bust loose. He was spoilin for a fight. Gary watched the scene unfold while he held Stevens in place, half standing, and half sitting at the table. Knowing if he turned loose

of Stevens arm, they would both be in jail for brawling in the restaurant. Hearing the fiery goddess with her warrior stance issue her threat, he wondered if maybe he should turn Stevens loose. The big man yanked hard on the blondes arm to bring her closer, pinning the other two women between them. And Stevens nearly yanked out of his hold at the same time.

"Don't do this Bradley, your causing a scene. Just go!" The Blonde said. The man quickly released her as if he'd had a hold of a live fire and it had burned his hand.

"We'll talk later Jessica." The man, Bradley, said. The other guests seated around them were starting to whisper to each other. The two women, one on each side of the blonde, slip their arm around her waist in support and walked out of the diner.

Gary took a deep breath and tried to relax his tense body. He watched the women leave. He released Stevens arm, pick up his beer and finished it with one last long pull. And watched the big man Bradley, that was with the women a moment ago, walk across the street to the Sunray Resort and Spa. The door attendant on duty quickly opened the door and bowed slightly, the man disappeared through the front doors of the resort. The same one they were watching.

"We'll check in after you finish your beer and cool off, Stevens." Gary said evenly. Stevens was a hothead to say the least and a great guy to have around when things go south.

Stevens sat staring at the main doors where he had last seen the three women exit. "Was she glowing? I swear the Blonde was glowing. For just a couple of seconds there seemed to be this, pearly iridescent, white glow around her." Stevens babbled. He grabbed his beer off the table and tossed back the remains, it did nothing to sooth his overheated system.

Gary didn't pay any attention to Stevens ramblings, "The big guy that just left, Bradley, he's probably the one in charge over there." He said and glanced over at the driveway entrance as the little red Z3, shot out of the parking lot, top down, long blonde hair whipping in the night wind with the beat of kiss my ass rock, left swirling in the air. "Let's go Stevens."

Rubbing the heel of his palm over his heart, Gary pulled his wallet from his back pocket and tossed enough cash to cover the

check, and a generous tip on the table. Was his heart racing? No, has to be your imagination Wellington. No flesh and blood woman had ever gotten close enough to make his heart race. But there was one who had. One who did make his heart race and yearn for things he thought would never be, The Phantom woman that had haunted his dreams since his earliest memories.

Following Gary out to the car, Stevens was lost in his own thoughts that circled back around to the glowing Blonde.

Driving across the street, Gary pulled up to the front doors of the resort. The door attendant hurried over and opened the driver's door of the Jag, while another opened the passenger door for Stevens at the same time. Bowing slightly, "Good evening sir, hope you enjoy your stay at the Sun Ray Resort & Spa." The doorman said with a smooth tone and a light Spanish accent.

Slipping the door attendant a bill, "I'm sure we will thank you." Gary said, taking his briefcase from behind the seat. Handing over the car keys, he accepted the valet ticket from the door attendant.

"I will see to your luggage and car sir." The attendant explained.

"Thank you." The entrance, an oasis that opened up like a fan flanked on both sides with four huge potted palms between them a marble bench, scrolled legs and padded seats inviting you to sit and relax while you were waited on. The doors both opened at the same time by two different doormen. Gary noted the presence of the guards. One on each side of the doors unmoving like statues, with their dark suits, and their little ear pieces only noticeable by the thin wire disappearing under the collar of the jacket. Gary and Stevens stepped through the open doorway into the lobby, a waterfall in the corner on each side. A sea of plush burgundy carpet muted their footsteps and flowed like wine, to the base of the concierges' desk. The slate grey granite top curved around in a big half circle, equipped with what looked like state of the art computers. "Good evening sir, do you have a reservation?" The concierge manning the desk asked.

"Yes, two rooms reserved for Mr. Wellington." Stevens glanced around the wide open lobby.

"We have suites 410 and 412 for Mr. Wellington. The rooms are next to each other with adjoining doors." He placed the registration card on the counter between Gary and Stevens.

Gary slid the card over filled it out, then handed it back along with his driver's license and black American express credit card, he'd taken from his wallet.

After checking in and receiving both room keys, a bellman appeared on the other side of Stevens to show them to their rooms on the fourth floor. They rode the elevator up in silence to the fourth floor. Gary looked at the back of the bellman's jacket, and wondered if he was armed.

They followed the bellman, and Gary was sure the bulge under his right arm was a gun of some sort. Who could possibly be in residence here that would require such security measures? Gary stopped at the door to his room and the bellman swiped the key card, and opened the door.

"See you in the morning, Wellington." Stevens said and kept walking, the bellman shot Gary a strange look before hurrying to catch up to him. Stevens stood at his door twenty feet down the hall and stared at his door with his arms crossed over his chest.

Gary smiled to himself and watched. "Yeah, make it 9 a.m. I'll have a look around the place first thing in the morning." He told Stevens, then entered his room, and shut and locked the door. Knowing sleep wouldn't come for hours; Gary crossed the room to the balcony doors and opened them to let in the cool salty breeze coming in off the Atlantic Ocean.

Standing out on the small balcony, he looked down at the beach below. He could see a few couples down on the beach walking together, making their way back to the pier. Back inside, he opened the mini frig for a beer, slipped off his shoes, and stretched out on the bed to watch the eleven o'clock news. Thoughts of the fiery goddess circled his mind, as he flipped through the cable channels. The gods had been in a fine mood the day she was born. All of that hair. He wished he could test the texture and weight of it with his fingers. To confirm it was the same as the woman in his dreams.

He had dreamed of the same woman for as long as he could remember. A few times he had tried to talk to her during his teen years, but she would only look him in the eye with the same knowing smile. Her eyes had been green, a sharp piercing emerald green. Without even realizing it, he drifted off to sleep. To, dream of the green-eyed goddess. She was real flesh and bone, no longer just a dream goddess. His Phantom Queen.

Far out to sea where the horizon met the ocean, the sun slowly rose to begin the new day, slowly, creeping its way up, the deep Prussian blue of the night sky faded back. The puffy clouds edged in pink and red. On the horizon, a dome appeared, blazing with the pale soft yellow and orange of the sun's rays. At 6:47 am Gary stood on the balcony and watched the last of the stars wink out giving way to a new day.

An early riser by nature, this was truly his favorite time of day. People came and went, willingly or unwillingly. Everything changed at some point in time, for better or worse. Gary had seen the horrors of mankind more so since he had enlisted with the Marine Corps for a four year stretch, and then the last ten years with the Atlanta Georgia Police Department as a Homicide Detective. And, no matter what was going on in the world around him every morning the sun rose.

In those first few minutes dark to dawn, dawn to daybreak the one and only constant in life. He felt everyone should take these few minutes every morning. To stop, to see and feel the new day begin.

Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt for a casual stroll around the resort, not knowing who, or what, he was looking for. Gary stepped into his lizard skin boots and hoped to see more of the man Bradley. The thought that he might be a little closer to finding his mothers killer and stopping the East Coast Lover from killing again had his blood humming. He was ready for some action. Walking back inside the room he closed the balcony doors and locked them then left his room to begin his stroll around the resort.

Stepping out of the elevator on the lobby floor, against the wall across from the elevator he found a small upright rack neatly filled with maps of the resort facilities and Daytona the surrounding area. Selecting a map of the resort Gary headed in the direction of the restaurant doors. Before he could open the door his self, Stevens appeared from nowhere to open it for him.

He eyed Stevens clothing, wondering if he'd even slept last night. Stevens had come from the direction of the main lobby. Gary shrugged it off, if his friend/ex-partner wanted to hang out in the lobby, who was he to complain.

“Mind if I join you?” Stevens smiled like a smug tomcat who’d ate the last canary, pulled open the door without waiting for an answer, and followed him inside.

The restaurant was as plush as the rest of the place. Except for the soft muted sound of silver ware and dishes being moved around the place was still fairly quiet. Following the host stationed just inside the door to a table, Gary noticed two of the women from the diner last night. The fiery goddess he had dreamed of and the Blonde. They were seated at a table next to them, Gary looked at Stevens and they both shrugged at the same time and said, “This is good for me.” Plopping down in the chair closest to the two women first, Stevens smiled back at Gary’s scowling face.

Gary leaned forward and swallowed the first word that nearly forced its way out. *Mine!* “Now be quiet and listen.” Stevens wasn’t a chatty person on the best of days, but he wanted to make sure they were on the same page.

Stevens leaned forward to hear Gary growl at him and smiled. “That was my plan,” Stevens whispered back. He caught the server’s attention with the same toothy smile, when she stopped at the two women’s table next to them topping off their coffee. As she moved toward them Stevens noticed the server had also brought two coffee mugs with her. She placed a mug in front of Gary, and filled it with fresh coffee. She looked over and asked, “Would you like some coffee this morning sir.” Gary gave Stevens a toothy smile; it would serve him right if she took her sweet time getting his coffee, since he grabbed the better seat.

“Yes, thank you.” Stevens leaned back in his seat listening to the two women behind him and made sure he looked to be studying the breakfast menu. He glanced over the top of it to see Gary doing the same, and frowned at what he was hearing.

“Jess, why are you here? You should kick that bastard to the curb after what he did last night. I can’t believe he grabbed you in a restaurant filled with a lot of people we know. How stupid can the man really be?” The fiery goddess said, and then flicked her long flame colored braid over her shoulder flopping back in her seat. Gearing up for one last try she asked, “How is your arm this morning? I know it has to hurt.”

Sighing to herself, Jessica knew Lena wouldn’t let it go, if she didn’t talk to her. “Its fine Lena, I said I would talk to him this morning on my way to the beach and that’s all I intend to do. I knew he wouldn’t take it well when I ended our relationship yesterday morning. Bradley just needs time to calm down and then he’ll be fine.” Jessica chewed on her lower lip. She prayed she was right about Bradley only needing time to get used to her not being his. She took a sip of her coffee to hide her worry.

Leaning forward, Lena propped her elbows on the table and stared Jess in the eye until she finally looked up. “You’re full horse apples. After what happen last night Jessica you need to file charges against him for assault and take pictures of your arm where he put bruises on you. Again.”

Jessica lifted her mass of blonde hair up, to ease some of the tension in her head and neck. From the moment she had seen Bradley walk into the diner last night, she’d felt like one big knot of flesh. She rubbed at the aching muscles, none to gently. “I know your right Lena, that’s why I agreed to meet him here in the restaurant instead of his office upstairs. This will only take a few minutes, and then I’m going to the beach. Now, you have to go before he see’s you, it’ll only set him off again.” She said taking Lena’s hand, squeezed it lightly for reassurance, and to ask for a little patience. “Kiss mom for me when you get home and don’t tell her any of this. She’ll only worry more than she already does.” Seeing the refusal in Lena’s green eyes, Jess pleaded with her. “Please, Just this one time don’t argue.” Jess whispered. The door to the restaurant opened and out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of Bradley. Her entire body froze, panic and fear skittered around inside, her muscles knotting up even more.

Feeling the tension in Jessica’s hand, Lena looked over her left shoulder to see Bradley Jacobs, glaring at her. Looking back at Jess, Lena was shocked at what she saw. Was that fear she was seeing in Jessica’s eyes? Can’t be, Jessica had never been afraid of anything. Before she released Jessica’s hand to leave, she leaned forward and whispered, “Are you sure you want me to leave?” She asked and watched all of the color drain out of her sisters face, leaving her ghostly pale. Bastard! Lena thought.

Jess looked Lena in the eye knowing Bradley was only a few feet away and whispered. "Yes. I'll be fine. Love you, go. Now, please." She hated to beg, hated the cold clammy feel of her skin.

Eating their breakfast at the next table, Gary and Stevens heard everything the two women had said for the last ten minutes or so. Gary looked at Stevens and shook his head. No. The tall angry man, Bradley, stalked over to the table. The fiery goddess, Lena, stood and turned coming face to face with the man again. Mere inches separated them. He swallowed hard. That one possessive word, determined to be free. *Mine!* A hard bone rattling shiver raked its way up and down his body. He forced himself to stay in his chair. *No lunging, must sit calmly. No, ripping the man's head from his body for coming to close to my woman.* Not, my woman. Yes she is. *Mine. Mine. Mine.* No, you don't even know her, let alone she doesn't even know you. *Mine!* Maybe he was coming down with the flu or some tropical disease.

Mine!

While staring down at his plate, Stevens angled his chair slightly to see out of the corner of his eye. Gary wouldn't put it past Stevens to stand up and tell Mr. Bradley to buzz off and leave the two ladies alone. He on the other had wanted to do much more than that. So, to keep the peace all around, he divided his attention between Stevens and the hostile party of three behind him.

Bradley Jacobs, cold as the Arctic wind on the outside, white hot raging mad inside at the sight of Lena Matthews on his property. *That bitch!* What is she doing here with her nasty boots, smelling of horseshit, taking up his time with Jessica? His Jessica! He would have to teach the smelly bitch a lesson. Bradley's hand snaked out fast to grab Lena by the throat.

The thought of his fingers clamping around her throat, squeezing until she expelled her last breath, excited him beyond words. I will beat some sense into that tiny brain of hers. His thoughts were a chant, a dark haze clouding his mind, blocking out all rational thought as to where and who he was. Kill her, snap her neck where she stood. I've done it before, and it was an aphrodisiac to his mind and body, made his blood heat, and heart pound in exhilaration.

Lena braced for the attack she could see in Bradley's cold lifeless eyes. She welcomed it with open arms like a long lost lover. It was time for Bastard Brad to get his, to be repaid in kind. She was brought up disappointingly short though, when Jessica quickly and silently slid between her and the low life bastard, she wanted to vent her pent up anger on.

"I had planned to try talking to you Bradley, but from the angry look in your eyes I can see that's not going to happen. So I'll tell you how it's going to be. Bradley, we are through. There is no us. You and I, have no plans, no future. You need to accept that now and move on." He moved to step forward and Jessica's hand came up, open palmed to stop him. Her control was slipping. Anger seeped in to her every pore, heating her from the inside out. It burned away the clammy feel on her skin caused from the fear and panic she had been feeling since last night. At him for hurting her, and herself for letting it happen. Knowing what would happen if he grabbed her wrist, she didn't move to stop him, and Jess really didn't care. Anger was good. Hot, after being chilled nearly to the bone by fear. Refreshing!

Bradley stepped forward, his right hand reaching for the bitch that had poisoned Jessica's mind toward him. But, he grabbed Jessica's wrist instead, and hissed between clenched teeth. His fingers felt like they were burning. He let go and snatched his hand back curling it into a fist at his side. Dark lifeless eyes, he focused on the smelly bitch standing behind his beloved Jessica. "What are you doing here, bitch?" He hissed looking her in the eye, wishing he could smash her face in with his injured hand clenched into a fist. "You're..." His breath hissed out, making him speechless. Shocked, his mouth hung open slightly, he stared at Jessica. She. Hit. Him. He continued to stare at her and tried to draw a deep breath.

Lena stood vibrating with so much anger, she surprised her bones weren't rattling against each other. A vividly clear visual of her launching herself over Jess standing in front of her, taking Bastard Brad down, and leaving him in a glorious heap of bruised and bloody flesh. Even though this was Jessica's fight to be fought, she had done nothing and Lena was passed the point of standing on the sidelines. "Jess..." Lena said softly in her ear, only to be ignored. What the hell was wrong him now, and why the strange look on his

face? *Whoa, she punched him?* Yeah, you go girl, knock him on his ass. He deserves no less than a taste of his own medicine.

Violence was never the answer, in Jessica's book, but some liked to learn things the hard way. She'd punched him with her fist just under the sternum. "Grow up Bradley, and while you're at it, get the hell out of my way." Knowing Lena had their purses, she sailed by him like a woman free of excess baggage.

Lena watched her step around the idiot headed for the door. Keeping her eye on Jess's parting back, Lena stepped closer to Brad and elbowed him hard in the same spot. "Bastard! Stay away from her or you'll pay." She warned him in a loud hate filled tone, and then followed Jess. Both women disappeared through the restaurant door.

Bradley still somewhat dazed by the two blows to his midsection, turned and stood there looking after them.

Gary nodded to Stevens. "Keep an eye on them and I'll hold down the fort."

Tossing his linen napkin over his plate, "I was thinking the same thing, myself." Stevens growled under his breath.

Knowing Stevens mind like his own, Stevens had more to do in his thinking than the eye keeping. Gary watched him aim a hard shoulder at the man standing some ten feet from their table. "*NO!*" He barked. Stevens sidestepped and shrugged all at once, mid stride, without breaking his long ground eating pace. The sudden appearance of the server at his elbow carrying the coffee pot and laying the bill face down on the table didn't surprise him. "Can I get you anything else, sir?" She asked.

Gary watched Bradley walk dazed, slowly out the doors. "The two women that just left, do you know their names?"

Looking over at the door her very angry boss had just went through. "Jessica Lane is the Blonde and Lena Matthews is the red head." Always ready to gossip or to hear new gossip she leaned her hip against the edge of the table. "What would you like to know about them, sugar? They both grew up here in Daytona."

Pushing open the door of the restaurant Stevens went left headed for the lobby doors, almost beating the door attendant to it. Muttering to himself, he nodded his thanks at the door attendant. "Bastard deserves everything he gets." He looked both directions

for signs of the two women, not spotting them at the front of the building, he took the sidewalk around to the south end of the building where the resort parking garage was. Stevens stopped at the corner of the sidewalk. He hesitated for a second at the sound of an engine revving up coming from inside the parking garage. The ramp leading into the garage was fairly short. Thirty feet max.

Stevens took a cautious step back. The little red Z3 shot up the ramp and out onto main without stopping for a breath, or to check for oncoming traffic. "Damn fool woman. Driving like that she'll get herself killed." Stevens commented and rocked back on his heels, unable to help himself, he smiled and watched the little red car head south on A1-A from the resort.

Another motor revved, this one a powerful diesel from the deep rumbling sound of it. He looked back down the ramp. "It'll never make it." He commented. Thumbs tucked in his back pockets. He smiled, "Ah, here she comes," the engine revved higher, gears shifting.

"What in the hell are you doing standing out here on the sidewalk? Did you lose them both, already?" Gary barked. He stepped up beside Stevens. Then wondered what had put the goofy look on Stevens face, when Stevens held up a finger for him to wait. A big white ford crew cab dually shot up the ramp, and down shifted as she, Lena, shot straight out into traffic without stopping.

His heart stopped, or skipped several beats; he wasn't sure which, at the thought of what the scene would have looked like if Lena, the goddess of fire, hadn't made it. He tried to breath, to draw in just a little air for his oxygen starved lungs, one small breath, two breaths. His chest felt so constricted, he was getting light headed. Damn her, wait until...

"God I love women," Stevens commented, slapping Gary on the back, "I need a car Wellington, unless we're car pooling like a couple of old ladies. They've both headed south."

He sucked in the much needed air; Stevens slap helped ease the tight ban squeezing his chest. "I'm already on it." Gary said headed back up the sidewalk, to where his jaguar sat waiting for them. Idly he wondered what his blood pressure was peaking at. Sure as hell wasn't a resting rate that he knew.

About ten miles south of the city limits, Gary found the Blonde, Jessica's, little red car in a beach side parking lot. "There's the

Blonde's car." Stevens said and Gary pulled into the parking lot, made a U-turn and head back to town.

"Her name is Jessica Lane; I'm dropping you off at the car rental place. After you get a car, come back here and keep an eye on her.

"Do you want me to follow her?"

"Yes. Where she goes, you go. Bradley Jacobs is the owner of that Resort. I'm running a background check on him now. While I'm waiting for that info to come back, I'll try to track down Jessica's friend, Lena Matthews."

Back in his suite, clicking away at the keyboard of his lap top computer, Gary filed the information, he had gathered on Jacobs. He typed Lena's name into the search engine and hit enter. The first item found was a web-site for a Matthews Stables so he clicked it. Now, Lena Matthews, daughter of Anna Matthews, he wrote the address down on the little memo pad on the desk. Matthews Stables webpage came up. Gary thought of the long lush, wavy flaming hair and emerald green eyes. He still couldn't believe she was a real person.

Scrolling down the page to a picture, he paused and let out a slow breath. Lena and a woman with light strawberry blonde hair and green eyes, stood next to each other in the doorway of the stables. "Lena's mother, they look too much alike to be anything else." Gary said. Under the picture was a list of services offered at the Matthew's farm with visitors welcome posted at the end. He stared at the list, on the left of the page, his arrow hovered over employment opportunities. He clicked on it. "I may need a reason to check the place out." His voice sounded convincing to his ears. The list showed three positions available, trainer, grounds keeper and groom, with detailed job descriptions for each position. Adding the site to his favorites file, he started a search on Jessica Lane and called Stevens. With the cell tucked between his ear and shoulder, Gary waited for Stevens to answer.

"Yeah, what's up?" Stevens whispered.

"Why are you whispering?"

"Can't talk, call you back."

Gary looked at the display screen on his cell, call ended. "Hmm, what's up with him?" Should he be worried, he wondered? "He'll

call back, he always does." Shrugging, he punched in the number for the Matthews Stables.

CHAPTER TWO

Dream Walker you must be on guard child of mine. Protect those you have been charged with at all cost. The nagging voice at the back of her mind demanded. And with each heart beat Lena's head throbbed harder. Only, it seemed to be getting worse as days turned to weeks over the last four months. Lena drove back to the farm, where she knew her mother was baking cookies. The thought of her mother brought other questioning worries to her mind.

At breakfast that morning her mom had seemed sad and out of sorts. Not her usual, cheerful talkative self. Lena wondered at the cause or was it a problem yet unresolved, while she drove home.

Did her mom know about the bad dreams, even though she hadn't told her about any of them? Had she found her laying somewhere unconscious, that was a strong possibility since it had happen five times. *Five trips to hell!* "Yiippeee. I'm so lucky." Lena groused sarcastically and slapped the stirring wheel, saying a little prayer that her mother hadn't found her like that.

On her left, she could see Jessica's place coming up. *You must protect...* "Oh, shut up already. I heard you the first forty times. Jeesh, give me some names for Pete's sake, or a place and time. Here's a good one what the hell is a dream walker? That would help. Something solid to go by, something other than your nagging voice, that only I, lucky me, can hear." Lena narrowed her eyes as she turned into her driveway, it sounded like she was wining. "Uugh, I can't stand winy people. That includes me."

Parking the dually in her space, Lena realized her mom's car was gone. *A reprieve hopefully.* Her mother did not like to answer questions, unless it was to her benefit. That always came back around to Lena acquiring a boyfriend, then taking the next step up to getting married. Let's not forget the grandbabies these first two goals achieved. She respected her mother's privacy, and she was afraid she might have to cross that line to get some answers.

Exiting the truck, Lena headed to her office located in the center of the action. She would gladly take the reprieve given, she had

work to do. Following the sidewalk into the stables, she heard the sound of her mother's car pulling in next to her truck and shutting off. She ducked into her office and shut the door. "Later, work now; grill her mother with personal questions later." *You must protect those....* "And that goes for you too, girl friend. Now, put a cork in it." Gods, she felt like pulling her hair and screaming. Huffing a heartfelt sigh, she went to work on a stack of payables.

Squatting behind the tall grass on the ridge of a dun, he could see her. Damn it was hot out there, but hey, he was paid to watch, tail and report her every move. So he ignored the heat. Some of the benefits did include looking at her long legs, long blonde hair and beautiful blue eyes, then he would take it, the heat. Yes sir, he would. He'd had worse assignments. Not, that he minded following Blondie. *Bet she leaves a wake of men lusting after her and doesn't even notice.* Stevens thought and being paid seven hundred fifty dollars a day sweetened the job just a little more.

He slid a little further down out of sight, Damn it, she had looked over at the same time he was up to high and the grass to thin for cover. She couldn't have seen him could she? He felt the sweat begin to slide down his back. Almost an eighth of a mile from her, with the camouflage of the three-foot tall grass, there was no way; he'd placed his self three hundred feet to the right of her path back to her car just to make sure. Now what was she doing, damn it. Blondie had said she would be here for an hour and half, at least that's what she said to whoever she was talking to on her cell phone while sun bathing in that little excuse of a bikini. If he could get a peek at her, without being caught, or should he wait. *Hmmm, can't take the risk until she's heading back to her car.* Stevens felt the cell vibrate in his back pocket; he pushed the on button of the earpiece. Whispering, "I said I'll call you back." He said without seeing who the caller was. Click.

Jessica sat up and looked over her left shoulder. Her nerves were starting to jitter, tightening her stomach muscles into bigger knots and a cold chill raced over her skin. The feeling, of being watched, set her heart pounding hard in her chest. Jess looked at her watch; she'd only been here thirty minutes. "So much for relaxing." With the beach towel wrapped around her waist, she looked around. The

waves' lapping gently against the shore was the only sound she could hear. She slung the bag over her shoulder to make the short hike back to her car. Why did her favorite spot on the beach have to be so far from parking? Jessica decided it really didn't matter, since it was quiet and not too many people ventured down this way.

With the exception, of the last three weeks, everything had been going great. She had made some progress going through her parent's things, and she'd ended her bad relationship with Bradley. Bradley Jacobs, muscles she had made tremble with the slightest touch, gorgeous eyes, a dark velvety brown that deepened when he looked at her. *"No, do not think about him, it's over."* She mumbled.

Reaching her car with the keys in hand, she deactivated the alarm and auto lock. Jess slid in to the slick red BMW Z3, shut the door and put the top down. She shouldn't have splurged but, what the hell, you only live once right. Pulling away from the curb, top down and the radio blasting, the wind in her hair, Jessica waited for a signal on her cell phone. After the signal bars sprang to life, she speed dialed Lena.

"Hello!"

"Hey, what took so long to answer?"

"Hey to you too Jess, what's up? Wait, let me guess your whipping through traffic, just left the beach, tops down on that pretty-red Z3. So what else is up?" Lena tried to keep a cheerful tone after the scene in the restaurant that morning. Frowning she thought about the bruise on Jessica's arm from last night.

"Well, we could have dinner, pizza and beer, tonight at my place. I'll spring for the pizza and you can grab the beer on the way over." Jess said.

The subtle change in Jessica's voice worried Lena. "Is everything all right? You sound like something's bothering you." She had to start probing for answers somewhere, might as well be Jess since she was talking to her first.

"No, I'm fine. Seven thirty is good for me, see you tonight." Jess said before ending the call.

Looking at the phone, Lena not only wondered, she now worried what was wrong with Jessica. The same urgent thought/voice,

Protect at all cost, intruded again. Tall, blonde and blue eyed with all the curves every woman wishes they had. People always think slut and or dumb blonde when they look at her. But in reality, now 25 years old; Jessica had only had two men in her life, her high school sweet heart, which joined the marines after graduation. And the Rat Bastard, Bradley Jacobs, who had wormed his way into Jessica's life.

Lena had never liked him. He was too slick, kept too many secrets and he verbally abused Jessica in front of others. She'd noticed small bruises on Jessica's arms before so it was probably safe to say he had also physically abused her. Just thinking about Brad made her madder than an ole wet hen.

Taking a deep breath, she lectured herself. *"Calm down Lena, Jess has finally, finally broken it off with him, it is over."* Jessica had not only been her best friend, but also a sister since they were in high school. Jessica had come to live with Lena and her mom, Anna, after her parents were in a fatal car wreck, killing them instantly, during the wee hours of the morning nearly eleven years ago.

Thinking of the long nights, they had sat up with Jessica, while she tried desperately to get through the pain and grief of losing both of her parents made her feel sad all over again. Lena's father had died before she was two years old, so it was just the three of them. Even without a man around and no help from anyone else, Anna, Lena's mom had done a wonderful job on her own, raising her and Jessica.

She shoved the thoughts aside for the moment as a velvety soft nose nudged her arm. "Hey big boy," Lena laughed, "caught me taking a side trip didn't you." Lena rubbed her hands along his neck and down his chest, checking both front legs for heat and any kind of tenderness. "You know Rich; I think you're going to do just fine at the race in Tampa." Rich, a huge coal black thoroughbred stallion, rubbed his lips over the top of her back pocket, then stepped away and swung his head around in a circle. "Okay, okay, here is your cookie. Now let us get you cleaned up and fed, so I can do the same for myself. You know how Jessica likes to fuss when we're late for dinner." She glanced at her watch, thinking of lunch and all the other paper work waiting for some of her undivided attention.

Lena gave the big stallion's lead line to the waiting groom, she had hired last week. "After rubbing him down give him his lunch, okay Lenny. I'll see you tomorrow morning." Watching the groom lead the big stallion into the stable, she remained standing on the walkway, until they were out of sight. Turning up the walk toward the house, Lena noticed the new flowers planted in big clay pots on both sides of the porch steps. Stopping in the mudroom, she kicked off her muck boots, and pulled the door to the kitchen open.

"Mom, where are you?" She yelled. There was just enough time for a quick swing through the kitchen, before she headed upstairs to the other office, knowing she had some more calls to make before getting ready for dinner with Jess.

Lena inhaled deeply stepping in to the kitchen. "Oh, those smell good. You know I still haven't lost the last three pounds I gained when you went on a baking spree the last time. Hmmm!" She walked over to the kitchen sink and washed her hands.

"Well I sure can't tell you gained any honey. Sometimes I worry that you'll dry up and blow away." Anna kept her back turned, not wanting Lena to see the worry and fatigue in her eyes, she had almost been caught watching the news broad cast speculating if the East Coast Lover had taken his fifth victim. *And another sister from her.*

Looking at her mom, they both knew they were the spitting image of each other, except Anna was twenty-five years Lena's senior. She noticed how tense her mother looked from the back while transferring cookies from pan to cooling rack. Should she start grilling her mother now, or wait? On the outside, her mom looked fine.

"Where are you off to now?" Anna asked hoping to keep her daughter from asking questions, she didn't want to answer.

A diversion, okay she would wait until later. "The office to finish some paper work, Jess and I are having dinner tonight. I don't know what, but something has Jess acting really strange.

"Have you talked to her about it?"

"No, not yet, I asked if there's anything wrong and she says she's fine. But, I will get it out of her tonight though even if I have to drag it out of her." She thought maybe she should apply the same to her mother. Then she'd know why she was so tense.

At the sound of the doorbell, Lena laughed at her mom rolling her eyes. "I'll answer the door; you need to eat lunch Lena." Anna wiped her hands on a towel hanging by the sink, then went to answer the door.

Lena grabbed two warm chocolate chip cookies from the cooling rack. Shoved one of them whole in her mouth, and leaned against the counter savoring the warm melted chocolate on her tongue. She took a big bit of the other one and her mom came back into the kitchen. Lena spun around quickly, after seeing the man follow her mom into the kitchen. Swearing to herself under her breath, Lena tried to swallow the big bite of cookie still in her mouth.

"Lena this is Gary Wellington." Lena blushed and turned back around. Anna wondered at the cause of that, and raised both arched brows in question. "Would you mind showing Mr. Wellington around, he's interested in the trainer position and I need to finish these cookies before the group gets here." She asked turning to pull another cookie sheet out of the oven when the timer went off. Then she noticed the way Mr. Wellington was staring at her daughter. Anna wondered if they knew each other somehow. Loudly clearing her throat, "I know you're busy, but I'm sure Mr. Wellington would appreciate it." She tossed a smile at Lena over her shoulder, conveying without a word; *I know you took a cookie while I was gone and be nice to the man.*

Seeing no way out of it, Lena sighed to herself. Damn it, why did the man from the restaurant have to show up at her house and how did he know where she lived? Turning, she faced her mom and Mr. sexy. *Damn it, he's even better looking up close.* Lena shrugged. It was no problem. "Sure, I'll give him the grand tour of the farm, mom." Lena prayed the heat she could feel in her face would fade quickly. She could only imagine how many shades of red she'd turned. "This way Mr. Wellington," Lena said holding the door to the mudroom open, and waited for him to walk through.

Yes, there she is.

Mine!

He stood in the kitchen, with lighting like sunlight, bright but not hard on the eyes. The sight of her leaning against the counter eating a cookie had his breath backing up in his lungs, his heart skipping several beats, then suddenly started racing. "Yes" He whispered not knowing he had voiced the one word thought, for

everyone in the kitchen to hear. The mighty have fallen in love with a fiery green-eyed goddess. Walking toward her, Gary gazed down into the deep pools of green, he lifted his hand to hold the door just above her head. "After you Miss Matthews" he said. Maybe he was coming down with the flu, or something. He thought again. His voice sounded strange to him. Gary didn't believe in love at first sight or anything fanciful like that. This was just so surreal.

Anna watched Mr. Wellington and Lena out of the corner of her eye. Her eyebrows rose, and she mentally patted her chest. *My, oh my, he's a handsome one.* She thought to herself, and heard her daughter give an unladylike snort. Anna sighed and hoped Lena didn't run him off. Lena had not had a boyfriend since high school, never mind a date with someone other than her girlfriends. Anna mentally shook her head after they left the kitchen. She couldn't worry about that right now; she had bigger fish to fry.

Walking through the mudroom, Lena slipped on her boots and pushed open the screen door. Men were so strange to her. Well, this one specifically anyway. The fluttering in her stomach still hadn't stopped. It had to be nerves or hunger pains, hearing his footsteps behind her, she continued down the walkway toward the stables. "This is the main barn here. Six stalls with a tack room and wash bay at one end. Small feed and hay room at the other end." She commented walking down the shed row, her boot heels clicking on the cement.

Hearing his mistress's footsteps, Rich, the big stallion, stuck his head over the stall door and gave a soft whinny in greeting.

"The office is in here and I share with the trainer." Turning to face him, she asked, "Are you looking for work, Mr. Wellington?" She turned to see the man walk over to the big stallion. Lena watched him approach quietly murmuring something. She was unable to make out what Mr. Wellington was saying to him. Rich laid his ears back at the strange man, and Lena opened her mouth to tell him not to get too close. But, before she could say anything Rich's ears pricked up, listening intently at what the man in front of him was saying.

Lena could only shake her head in wonder, at man and beast. Rich was famous for suddenly trying to take a bite out of anyone

close enough to his stall door. Keeping her halting remark to herself, she waited to see what they thought of each other. Keeping an eye on Rich, Mr. Wellington rubbed his hand over Rich's neck, then scratching behind his ear, still whispering to the stallion. Rich swung his massive head in two tight circles and then reached over to rub at the back pocket with his puckered top lip. *Well, damn!* Lena huffed and pulled a cookie out of her left back pocket. "Here give him this." Lena said, handing over the cookie. "He's asking for a treat."

Gary looked at her hand took the cookie and held it out in the palm of his flat hand. "This is one fine stallion you have here, Miss Matthews. It is Miss, I hope?" He asked, speaking quietly. The stallion nipped the cookie out of his palm, and snorted softly. Gary rubbed the broad forehead, waiting for her to answer.

Lena stepped back wearily from the question and what she thought he might mean by it. "Yes. And yes he is. Are you looking for work, Mr. Wellington?" He was so... Big. At a quick glance from head to toe, she figured he was at least six-foot three or more. Broad shoulders, and.. Mmmmm... Nope, not going there, she would be all business and no more looking at those shoulders. *Or anything else.* She cleared her throat in an attempt to get her mind back to the subject at hand.

"Maybe, I haven't decided yet." Gary kept his eyes on the stallion while thoughts of getting to know the fiery goddess circled his mind.

After checking the time, Lena groaned inwardly. "We have to get a move on; I'm a bit pressed for time to day. Would you like to finish the tour, or have you seen enough?"

The woman was prickly and obviously used to giving orders. He didn't like prickly woman, as a rule. "I've seen enough. Who does the hiring, you or your mother?"

"I do the hiring for the farm Mr. Wellington."

"Make it Gary, and since you're pressed for time now, how is 10 a.m. tomorrow morning, work for your schedule?"

"10 a.m. is fine but we'll have to talk while I work."

They walked, side by side, down the shed row out to the front of the stables, and up the walkway, to where he had parked his Jaguar next to her Ford dually. Both of her eyebrows shot up at the sight of

his car. "That's a fancy car, for someone maybe looking for work." She commented.

"See you in the morning Miss Matthews." Gary opened the door and slid into the Jag. Ignoring her comment figuring it was bait. Backing out of the space next to the big dually he headed toward the main road, and watched her in the rear view mirror for as long as he could. The cell phone lying in the console, beeped twice for two missed calls. He flipped it open, and pressed the send button. Heading back east on state road 214, toward Daytona, he remembered seeing a sheriff substation about eight miles up the road.

"Stevens."

"Where are you?" Gary asked still thinking about Lena standing on the sidewalk. The thought crossed his mind, that Miss Matthews might be able to give him some insight about Bradley Jacobs.

"I'm out in the country, with my eyes glued to the blonde's house." He was waiting for another look at her legs; maybe she would do some yard work in real short shorts. *Please, If there is a God.*

"Her name is Jessica, so quite calling her the Blonde. What road are you on?" Gary didn't have to wonder where Stevens mind was, not when there was a woman around for him to look at.

"Yeah Jessica, Hmm, I'm on State road 214." Stevens drawled lazily.

"What does the house look like, I'm heading east on 214 now?" Houses visible from the road were few and far between in the rural area out here, from what he'd seen so far.

"You can't miss this place man; it's on the south side of the road. There's a guard shack, on the eastside of the driveway with two twelve-foot, rod-iron gates blocking the entrance. Damn place looks like a fortress from out here on the side of the road."

"Stick with tailing Jessica. I have a meeting in the morning, but call me if anything happens." He flipped the cell shut and laid it back on the seat. If it was the same place he was thinking of then it was just around the next curve up ahead.

"We'll do." Stevens pressed the end button on the cell and tossed it in to the seat next to him. Settling back in his seat he hoped for nothing exciting. Knowing he was out of sight of the guard shack, tucked behind some trees at edge of the east property line, he could

relax and let his mind roam from thought to thought. He wondered where Gary was on 214 and what Miss Jessica was doing tucked into that big house of hers. Stevens, was thinking about lighting a cigarette and the fact that there wasn't, too much traffic, out this way. Then at the faint sound of an oncoming car, he leaned over to see around the tree in front of him. Gary's silver Jaguar. Stevens flicked him a wave when his friend flew by.

Lena was finishing her paper work and filing it when the office phone rang. Shifting a sack of folders out of the way, she managed to pick up the phone on the second ring without knocking everything off the desk "Matthews Stables."

"Hi, Lena its Jim, calling to confirm tomorrow's appointment."

She reached over the precarious stack of files and flipped to the Nineteenth of February. Looking at the appointment book, she ran her finger down the left side of the page to the correct time, 8:30 farther south stables. "Yeah, we'll be ready Jim. See you tomorrow." A normal day started at four thirty in the morning on the Matthews farm.

"Okay, bye Lena."

Hanging up the phone, Lena stretched trying to work the kinks out of her neck from sitting at the desk for two hours and closed the appointment book. "I better get moving," She mumbled. You have no time or business thinking about Gary Wellington and your meeting with him tomorrow. Muttering to herself, about the laws of being that good looking, she head for the shower, to wash off the day. "Men that good looking, are nothing but big problems, great eye candy to look at from a distance but, problems none the less." Lena could feel the butterflies start fluttering in her stomach again, at just the thought of him. She pressed a hand low onto her stomach and stepped into the shower. "I must be really hungry." Damn the man for stirring her up. No man had ever stirred her up. At least none had before. Quickly washing, she turned the water off and bundled her long hair up in a towel. Dropping the other towel on the floor, after drying off, to stand on while she rubbed lotion on her sun kissed arms and legs. She quickly ran a comb through her hair and gave herself a-thumbs up in the mirror.

Coming out of the bathroom, she could hear the group of women down in the living room laughing. Lena slipped her favorite faded

jeans up over her long toned legs and pulled on a t-shirt. Grabbing her purse and keys off the dresser, she jogged downstairs and stopped in the living room doorway. Taking in the group Lena noticed one of the ladies was missing. Checking her mother's outer appearance, she thought she looked a little more relaxed than earlier in the day. Then, walking over to her mom's chair, Lena bent and kissed her cheek. "Don't wait up; I shouldn't be too late tonight." Smiling at the other women, she asked, "Where's Mrs. Cragg?" It was very odd for any of the women to miss out on their little group meetings.

"Oh, she had a date this evening dear, she sends her kisses. And how have you been, little Lena?" Mrs. Barns said, smiling up at her.

"Just fine Mrs. Barns," Lena answered and walked over to kiss each of the women on the cheek. She smiled at the group. They were all so beautiful. "Send Mrs. Cragg my kisses as well. Good night." The group of women had been coming over for tea and cookies, topped with lots of gossip, for about ten years now.

"Lena, don't forget to take the cookies with you."

"I won't, mom. Love you." She tossed over her shoulder, and shrugged off the worrying thoughts of Mrs. Cragg. Lena grabbed the bag of cookies off the counter her mother had packed, before pulling open the door to the mudroom, remembering the fluttering in her stomach when Mr. Wellington had been standing so close she could feel his breath flutter softly across her lips. And wondered what they would feel like if he kissed her, hard and strong, or soft and sensual. "*Stupid, stupid girl. Stop thinking about him,*" Scolding herself, Lena stomped over to the truck and reached for the handle to open the door. The loud snapping of a branch had her hand freezing an inch from the door handle, her heart thudded in warning. She gripped the handle like a lifeline and looked over at the woods that bordered the west property line.

The sun light was almost completely gone now, the surrounding woods so dark, she was unable to see individual trees clearly. A familiar cold chill raced through her body, making the hair on the nap of her neck and arms stand up, her skin breaking out in goose bumps. "*He watches Dream Walker, we must prote...*" "Ugh give it a break will ya I'm not a dream anything and there is no we." She was a normal average girl damn it. She was not going crazy.

Snarling at the dark wooded area, Lena sat the beer in the bed of the truck and yanked the truck door open. She climbed in and slammed the door shut. After starting the truck, she backed out and pointed the headlights at the area where she thought she'd heard the noise come from. The bright spotlights mounted to the top of the truck flashed on and she scanned the area for any movement. Not seeing anything unusual she shrugged her shoulders trying to dislodge the feeling of someone watching her. Shifting into first, Lena headed out to the main road. Still channel surfing the radio, ten minutes later she pulled into Jessica's driveway, she pressed the button to roll down the window.

"Hey Jack, how's it going?" Lena smiled at Jessica's security guard.

"It's going great, Miss Matthews, just great. Miss Lane said you would be bye this evening. I'll let her know you're on your way up."

"Thanks, Jack." She waited for the two big gates slowly opened. Driving through and on up to the front of the house, Lena parked next to Jess's little red car and hopped out. She grabbed the beer out of the bed of the truck.

She walked up the steps wondering where Lela, Jessica's big dog was. Lena opened the massive front door, and rapped a couple of quick knocks on it. Hearing Lela bark, Lena quickly moved to shut the door behind her. Walking passed the staircase on her right that swept up and to the left, she turned left and stepped down into the sunken in living room. She let out a deep sigh as she passed the big sink into me over stuffed couch. What a lovely thought, to stretch out right there for a short nap.

Walking into the kitchen, she found Jessica standing at the island counter in the center. "Didn't you hear me knock?" She sat two beers on the bar and went to the refrigerator to put the rest of the beer away, her stomach rumbled in protest.

"Yes, I heard you. I was on the phone," she pushed the plates over to the other side of the bar along with the pizza.

"Brad didn't call, did he? The man really is a nut."

"Which time are you referring to? Bradley has called nine times, since I have been home. The last call was to let me know he had a meeting this evening and he would call me later tonight. Can he be

that hard headed Lena?" She slid on to her bar stool and pushed her hair back over her shoulder.

Twisting the tops off both beers, Lena wished it were Bradley's slimy neck she was twisting instead. Handing one of the beers to Jess she took a sip of her own. "Is Bradley what's bothering you Jess or is it something else, I know something is wrong. You sounded strange this morning when you called."

She took her time choosing a piece of pizza, "That's part of it," Taking a bit of her pizza, thinking about the creepy feeling of being watched while she was at the beach this morning. "Maybe I'm just tired or something. I went through some boxes of my parents things the other day." Then there had been the bad dreams of the black fog. Jessica was keeping that to herself for now.

Lena rubbed Jessica's arm in comfort. "You know if you want company while you go through their things, you've only to call, Jess. There's no reason for you to do that alone, unless you chose to." She decided to change the subject and take Jessica's mind off things for a while.

After taking another bit of her pizza, Lena asked, "Do you remember the guy in the diner last night, the one sitting out on the deck with his friend?"

"The one you were staring at? How could I forget, I've never seen you so totally absorbed by a man like that?" Jessica laughed at the pinched look on Lena's face, completely erasing all signs of the worry from her eyes. "If Jane hadn't kicked you under the table, you'd still be sitting there with your eyes locked on his. That man looked like he was ready to eat you in one big bite." She watched Lena's face redden with embarrassment over her reaction to the good-looking man. "Why are you asking?"

"Hmmm... He showed up at the house this afternoon." Lena slowly took another bite of her pizza knowing Jessica would want all the little details, including the juicy bits.

Smiling, knowing now why Lena had blushed so hard. "Please, do tell all and hold nothing back. What does he look like up close?"

She could feel her face getting redder and hotter by the second. "I can tell you," Patting herself on the chest, Lena hoped she wouldn't choke on the pizza first. "He is absolutely delish up close. I'm standing in the kitchen leaning against the counter," she

swallowed another bite of pizza. "Mom goes to answer the door, so I'm trying to steal a couple of cookies before she comes back. In she walks with the man on her heels." Lena took a sip of her beer, just thinking about him made her stomach jumpy. "I'm telling you, I nearly choked on the cookie I had just shoved in my mouth."

"Mom knows you steal cookies when she bakes them and right off the cooling rack to. I don't know why you keep doing that?"

"It's a game we play, I steal them hoping that she won't catch me at it and she knows but acts like she doesn't." Lena shrugged taking the bag out of her purse and laid it on the counter next to the pizza box. "Just like she always sends a bag full over for you, knowing I'll end up eating most of them."

Sliding the bag out of Lena's reach, knowing by the smell there was chocolate in the bag. "Don't count your little chickys before they hatch this time sis, I'm in need of a chocolate fix tonight. Now, back to the juicy subject of Mr. What's his name. Give over Lena; you know I won't stop till I have all the 411."

Stalling, Lena reached into her purse for a pack of cigarettes and lighter and got up to get the ashtray from under the sink. "Every time I think about him my stomach gets jumpy, like a big family of butterflies is living in there."

Lena had never been out on a real date with a man. After the one bad date she'd had in high school, Lena kept a lot of breathing space between her and any male in the room. "Lena you have to get passed that night. It was seven years ago. Not all men are like that whatshisname, Ted, Fred, Al. Whatever." She said, with a flick of her fingers, to show how unimportant the boy really was now.

"I know I work around them and with them all day." She replied in a cool not-talking-about *that* night voice. Lena hardly ever thought about *that* night. And she refused to go there now.

Jess watched most of the color drained from Lena's face, and she regretted mentioning it. At the same time she knew Lena had to get passed that traumatic experience in order to move on. Lena deserved to love and be loved in return by a good man and if she had to shove Lena, literally, beyond *That* night's trauma then that's what she would do. "Yes and you always keep several feet between you too. When your stomach gets jumpy is it from being afraid or something else?"

Ignoring that question, Lena said, "His name is Gary Wellington. Okay, he has slate grey eyes, nice body. Great body is more like it. He's at least six foot three." Lena pulled a cigarette out of the pack and lit it. Casting her eyes up at the ceiling, remembering how embarrassed she had been, before looking back at Jess, "Mom asked me to give him a tour of the farm while I was trying not to choke on the cookie. I nearly stroked out right there in the kitchen. I think my heart stopped or at least skipped several beats." Lena laughed at herself. "After I had finally swallowed the damn cookie I looked over at him and he had the same look on his face he had last night, kind of dazed looking, like someone had hit him on the head. Then I hear mom clearing her throat like she has something stuck in it." She said shaking her head at herself. "That's when I realized I was staring at him. *Again!*"

Thinking to herself, Jessica tapped her fingernail on the granite counter top, yes, this was sounding better and better. She'd just have to get a closer look at this Gary, herself. See what he's all about, "So go on, what happened on the tour?" Jessica wiggled her fingers in a keep-going motion, and kept her thoughts to herself.

Lena stabbed her cigarette out in the ashtray and drank some of the beer that was getting warm. "I took him into the main stables and Rich started that soft whinnying he does when he wants a cookie. The man just walked right up to him, talking softly. I thought for sure Rich was going to take a bite out of him. I know he was thinking about it. Had his ears pinned back and his lips were starting to curl up, showing his teeth. Then all of a sudden, he relaxed and acted like the man was his best friend in the whole world. Then Mr. Wellington is rubbing his neck and scratching behind his ear in his favorite spot."

Noticing the formal name Lena used. Hmmm. Jessica knew Lena only did that when someone was able to annoy her. "So, what happen next?"

"Rich was asking for a cookie, swinging his big head around. You know he won't stop unless you give him one. So I gave one to him, Mr. Wellington, to give Rich."

"Is he coming back to the farm?"

Lena rolled her eyes before answering. "Yes, don't get any ideas about match making. He might be looking for work, whatever that means. Oh and get this." Lena said, and slapped her hand down on

the granite bar top. "The man drives a Jaguar, a silver Jaguar with dark tinted windows. Now I ask you, what would a man be doing, looking for work on a horse farm, driving a car like that?" She asked in disbelief. Lena and Jessica were looking at each other, when the phone started ringing.

"Let the answering machine get it. If it's mom we'll call her back. I'm not expecting any one else to call." Jessica said, knowing the volume was off on the machine. She picked up the dishes to clear the counter.

"Anyway, he's coming back tomorrow morning for a formal interview." Lena rolled her eyes and watched both of Jessica's eyebrows shot up under her bangs.

"Are you going to hire him?"

"I don't know. I need the help since two of my men took off to work at that new farm in Kentucky. He seemed to know horses, with the way he talked to Rich and he's the most skittish of strangers or anything new on the farm out of the thirty head of horses we've got." The question she had to ask herself was, could she work around the man six days a week? And it not kill her? It sounded like self inflicted torture to her. Hell, she felt fluttery and jumpy now and the man wasn't even present. What would day in and day out do to her; it would drive her nuts that's what.

"If Rich took to him that quickly, he's probably been around horses before."

She sighed heavily, disgusted with the situation and life in general. All work and no play had been her motto for the last seven years. Now, she had a choice. Lonely or lusty. Lena-works-a-lot or Lena-has-more-help. The farm was pretty big, and she did go days without seeing some of the men working for her, maybe it would work. "Yeah, probably, I need the help right now. Why don't you pack some stuff for you and Lela and stay at the house for a couple of days?" Lena had missed the long conversations they had shared before Jessica had bought her own place.

Jess closed the dishwasher door and turned it on. "That's the best idea I've heard all day." She whistled softly for Lela and walked to the patio doors to let her out. Hearing Lela's toenails click on the tile floor, she looked outside into the dark. Seeing nothing move outside around the deck she slid the door open, and after Lela went out she slid it shut. "Have you ever felt like you were being

watched?" She asked while still looking out the back door, waiting for Lela to come back. Glancing over at Lena, Jess waited for an answer.

Lena frowned at the question. "Actually, yes I have, tonight when I was leaving the house. I heard a branch snap." She shivered at the thought of someone watching that you couldn't see. "I hope I blinded them with my spot lights, all seven of them."

Jess opened the door, as Lela came up the steps of the deck, for her to come back in. And shut and locked the door behind her. "I hope you did too."

"Why did you ask me that?"

"Because, that's just the way I felt all morning. I know I was being watched, it's somewhat of a creepy feeling. I think I will come over for a couple of days. Maybe get a closer look at this Gary Wellington."

Lena narrowed her eyes at Jessica. "Mom would love it. That's for sure. *But. No. Matchmaking.* Mom had a funny look in her eyes, so I know she's up to something."

Standing in the wash bay with Rich, Lena began humming a lullaby softly to him while soaping and scrubbing him all over. Born on their thirty-acre horse farm, R & R was his registered name, the initials stand for Rich and Rare, Rare form, her favorite mare now retired from the track, was the number one brood mare on the farm. The sire Queens Pride had just finished winning the last race to complete the famous Triple Crown. The private treaty being very confidential, just a very few people knew she had bred one of her mares to the top thoroughbred. "I paid a hefty price to bring you this far."

When Rich started to whinny, Lena looked over his back to see what had excited him. First thing to come to her mind was, *Hmmmm, Yuummmmy!* Glancing at her watch, well he's ten minutes early for their meeting. "Your early, I'll just be a few minutes finishing up."

"I'm in no rush, take your time." He stepped closer to the big stallion and realized he missed his own horses back home in Georgia.

Lena turned the hose on to rinse the soap off Rich as Gary was going over the sixteen three-hand stallion with his hands checking muscle tone, temp of said muscles, texture of skin and coat.

She started to imagine him sliding his wide palmed, long fingered hands over her with the same care he was showing the horse, only with a very different affect. Lena wondered at the texture of his palms and fingers, where they smooth or calloused. Giving herself a mental kick, do not go there; you do not even know this man. She could feel the blood heat in her veins and begin to pulse.

Making sure not to look at his eyes, god help her, this man made her spit dry up, her heart race and her palms sweat. Lena tried to clear her dry throat, "Step back so I can rinse him off." She didn't think her tone carried the right impression, offhanded and uncaring whether he got sprayed or not. No, to Lena it sounded rough, and so not, her normal indifferent tone.

Standing, on the opposite side of Rich, "What time do you start in the mornings?" Gary asked, watching her he stepped back out of the way.

"Five a.m." After she shut the water off, Lena squeegeed off as much of the excess water as possible with the sweat scrapper. She pinned him with cool questioning eyes. "Mr. Wellington, why are you looking for work on a horse farm?"

"I'm a trainer looking to relocate." Gary shrugged his shoulders, not sure where the question came from, or where it was going. He held her gaze and wondered at her coolness. "Why do you ask?"

"Just wondering why someone who happens to drive a Jag would be looking for work." She voiced her thoughts from last night unhooked Rich's halter from the cross ties, and led him out of the wash bay to his stall.

Moving around to the other side of Lena he walked with her. Gary noticed the hip hugging jeans she was wearing again. He stopped at the office door to wait for her to put the big stallion in his stall.

Leading Rich into his stall she slid his halter off. "Here you go boy." She said, pulling the stall door closed and hanging up the halter. Lena noticed her palms were sweating now that her hands were empty. Rubbing them dry on her jeans, she turned to face him. Her eyes locked with his. She walked toward him and the office doorway. Stopping in front of him, she wasn't close enough

to touch him, but close enough to feel his body heat. Lena wondered why this man could scatter her thoughts, make her heart pound with anticipation for something she didn't know or understand. So, she settled on a viable question he should answer. "Why are you relocating, Mr. Wellington?"

With his eyes he traced the contour of her face down, to lock onto her lips scattering all his thoughts, except one. *To feel and taste her lips against his.* Then back up to her dark emerald green eyes. He could see himself there, lost in those eyes looking at back him like she could see straight to his soul. "Change of scenery to start." He finally managed to say after several seconds had passed.

His voice a low husky gruff sound coming from deep in his chest, seeing the desire in her eyes, matching what he felt, sent his libido rocketing into outer space. Somehow he knew she was about to break eye contact. Gary felt he wouldn't be able to take another breath without a taste of her on his tongue, seared in his memory. Just one kiss, his eyes still locked with hers.

The breath was backing up in her lungs making her feel light headed. Lena's gaze still locked with his. She didn't realize she had taken a step forward until she felt his hands on her hips. Slowly bringing her closer, making her heart pound and something hot whip through her body like a tornado.

Feeling light headed, Lena let out the breath she had not been aware of holding. She braced her hands against his chest. *Demand or retreat*, the question raced through her mind. Beneath his shirt, Lena felt the solid wall of his muscles. Demand, I choose. She slid her hands up his chest and into his hair, noting its softness, before fisting them on both sides of his head to pull him closer, and whispered against his lips. "Just, this once." Her eyes open, still locked with his, not caring that she had voiced her thoughts.

His fingers flexed on her hips, and he felt the firmness of her muscles. Lust, potent and hot, punched straight through his body. "Just, this once?" His question, a whisper of breath. Keeping his eyes open, with the tip of his tongue Gary licked, and then nibbled at the corners of her lips. Before finally, covering her lips fully with his.

Oh, damn! Really, bad idea. "He is ours." The last clear thought Lena had before her brain fogged over with his sent and taste. His hands stroked up her back, softly, lighting fires everywhere they

touched. Kneading the muscles from her neck down to her hips, caressing her and pressing her more firmly to him until his hard member pressed against her lower abdomen. His hands, taking a firmer grip, just under her hips, lifted her higher.

Quickly turning, Gary braced her against the wall, her legs wrapped around his waist, and the heady sent of him seeped into her. His tongue caressed and stroked. A mating of heart and soul. The blinding heat coursing through Lena's body brought her crashing back to reality with a thud. Turning her head to the side to break the kiss, gave him access to her slender neck.

"Stop Gary!" She panted, breathing fast and hard. Similar to just running the four-miler in half the time of a marathoner. Her hands still fisted in his hair, she held him back from her lips. The temptation to sink back into those masterful lips, let him have his way with her body was so powerful she knew she'd be lost, heart and soul, torn apart in the fallout.

His fingers flexed on her thighs not wanting to release her, and then he saw wariness quickly replace the passion in her eyes. Cursing himself, for letting things go so far so quickly. Keeping eye contact he moved his hands up to her waist. She lowered her legs to stand on her own. Gary braced his hands on the wall, at the side of her head, his breath heaving from his chest. "You pack one hell of a punch, Lena." Was that his voice, a husky whisper laced with unreleased passion? "I have no regrets kissing you, even though I didn't mean for this happen so quickly. You know we'll finish this sooner or later."

She stiffened at the threat, or promise. "Back off Wellington, I won't be pushed into this or told. If you still want a job you can start tomorrow 6 a.m." Lena ducked under his arm to put distance between them, before her body betrayed her again. She walked into the office to get the keys he would need. She turned to see he had followed her into the office.

Lena sat in her office chair to put the desk between them, pulled the top right drawer open and picked up the other set of keys. Tossing the keys on the desk, "This is your set of keys; they unlock the feed and tack rooms you'll need access to. I run a tight operation here Mr. Wellington."

"Make it Gary, since we've gotten to know each other a little better." He picked up the keys and slipping them into the front pocket of his jeans. He gave her a nod. "See you in the morning."

Standing in the kitchen Lena stared at the coffee maker as it perked and gurgled, drowning out the last of her crazy night terrors. That poor woman, all of the dreams had been of women. "*Dream Walker,*" *shut up shutupshutupshutup.* She kept up the mantra determined not to think or hear crazy stuff before her first cup of coffee. She prayed it would hurry. Hearing, her mom enter the kitchen, "Just in time," Lena announced pouring them both a cup, and handed one to her mom.

"Oh honey, you look exhausted." Anna said as she put her hand on Lena's forehead checking for fever. Once a mother always a mother, some would say. But they, their whole family were more than just your normal everyday group of relatives.

"I'm fine mom it's lack of sleep that's all." Lena was feeling pretty-grouchy this morning thanks to Mr. Wellington and strange whacked out dreams of being two different people. Dream walker. If she could get a look at the person she seemed to follow maybe that would help explain what she was suppose to do. And she was keeping that bit of info to herself since there was no reason to get her mom's hopes up or worrying her, and she would do exactly that. Mom had those match making idea's floating around in her head at times and why she wanted to marry her and Jess off Lena had no idea.

Anna took her cup to sit at the kitchen table knowing Lena would take her coffee and the clipboard out on the deck like she did every morning. Taking a sip of her coffee, Anna eyed Lena over the rim. She'd almost been caught yesterday, walking into the stable. Stopping abruptly, when she had seen Lena and Mr. Wellington wrapped around each other like saran wrap clinging together, yes and what a lovely sight it was too. She would be surprised if the two of them hadn't left a full body singe mark on the wall they had been up against. Finally someone to give Lena a run for her money.

She sat the coffee cup on the table, her fingers still wrapped around its warm comfort. "What kept you awake is there a problem with one of the horses?" Anna couldn't say anything about what

she sensed when she had touched Lena's forehead. She knew the time would come when things would change for her girls.

"No, the horses are fine." Wondering how to put into words, the emotions Gary had stirred up in her. Lena knew she could talk to her mom about anything, they always had. Their relationship didn't stop at mother and daughter they were also best friends, sharing everything. Well except for something like this and the dreams. The searing heat coursing through her body, just thinking about him made her shudder with anticipation. She pondered how to word her question, like, *Mom have you ever had a man make you almost spontaneously combust?* The absurdity of the question Lena had to laugh at her self.

"So how did the interview with Mr. Wellington go?" Hoping, for some kind of insight into the hot kiss, she had seen. Oh, she had done her homework on Mr. Wellington all right, his background check and all; of course, no one needed to know that but her.

"Fine I guess that's part of what kept me awake last night." Checking the time she picked up her coffee and the clipboard, she didn't want to get into the subject of Mr. Gary Wellington. "I'll tell you about it later, he'll be here in an hour."

Going over to the stove so her back was to Lena, inside Anna was doing a little victory dance and smiling to herself. That girl needed some spice in her life. The world didn't revolve around horses day and night forever. No, something was coming she could feel it, shoving the thoughts of the dark fog she had seen in her dream last night aside. "I'm making banana nut pancakes with whip cream for breakfast. Is Jess coming over today?"

"I'm not sure if she's coming today or not. I'll call her later and find out." Noticing the mischievous gleam in her mom's eyes, she seriously wondered, *great now what is she up to?* Knowing if she was to ask, the only answer she would get was *nothing dear.* Going out on to the deck, Lena inhaled the fresh early morning sent of her mom's flowerbeds. She looked out over the slightly rolling hills of their farm, after sitting the clipboard and her coffee on the deck railing. There had been talk among the grooms yesterday about the new trainer she had signed on after her interview with him. Gary Wellington, an excellent trainer, so her mother had said last night after she had came home from Jess's. *Humph, we will see.* The thought of seeing Gary this morning, Lena could feel excitement

start to sing in her veins. Shaking her head at herself, "Too much to do, for those kinda thoughts this early."

Picking up the clipboard, leaving her coffee cup on the railing, she headed toward the stable entrance. "There should be Beware signs posted for men like that." She said mumbling to herself, still thinking about him. She rounded the corner of the barn and walked straight into what felt like a brick wall of tall hard toned muscle. The excitement that was already coursing through her veins, lit like a raging forest fire in the middle of five-year drought after making body contact with the big man!

Looking up, Lena almost sighed out loud before she caught herself. Nearly hypnotized by the gray eyes she was looking into; her palms resting on what she could feel was a very solid wall of defined chest muscle. Yes, there was something to be-said about memory cells in the body. Hers seem to have a one track mind since yesterday.

"I'm so sorry Lena, are you okay?" Gary gripped her gently by the shoulders to keep her close and from falling.

She was hoping she could shake the fuzz from her head the body contact had caused. She inhaled the scent of him, which caused her to stammer. "I...I think so." God he smelled good. Something spicy and... No, no she couldn't go down that road. Not wanting to be too friendly just yet, with her brows drawn together Lena looked up at him, "Why don't you watch where you going Mr. Wellington?" She hoped she sounded exasperated and not interested.

"Yes ma'am. Sorry about that." Gary noticed the heat of embarrassment climbing up her neck and into her cheeks and smiled down at her, making them the color of soft pink rose petals. The face of an angel with beautiful emerald green eyes. After the mind-blowing kiss they had shared yesterday, he had thought of little else, not even his main reason for being in Florida.

"Why are you still hanging on to me? Let me go." Lena stepped back and shrugged his hands off of her shoulders. Shake him off, or god only knew she would be climbing all over him again if he kept touching her.

Stepping back and putting his hands up, he realized his mouth had gone bone dry. He was hoping some of the blood would soon return to his brain, so he could say something, remotely adult like,

instead of babbling like some teenage schoolboy facing his first major crush.

The smile that Gary seemed helpless to stop from happening, reached his eyes causing them to darken. She didn't want to like his smile. Straight white teeth flashed in front of her face. Taking in the features of high slashing cheekbones, straight nose, and dimples that had appeared in each cheek when he smiled, a lean face tanned from the sun. Moving the rest of the way back to the stormy gray of his eyes, Lena noticed they had darkened to the color of smoke with something else in there she couldn't read.

Feeling her stomach knot and jump with butterflies and the heat she had never felt before yesterday. Lena decided that smile of his should be illegal to use on any woman still breathing.

The smell of her was intoxicating, something he would have to think about later when he was alone. "I'll be sure to from now on Mrs. Matthews."

"Good, let's go over to the south barn. The farrier will be here later, so you'll need to go over the charts. Get to know the horses and their schedule." To herself she added, then I'm ditching you. The place was big enough to keep two people well away from each other if at least one wanted it that way. She had to, at least, until she had her unruly mind and body under some kinda control.

Two weeks, had it really been two weeks? Standing next to Rich, looking at Lena, he could always smell her before seeing her, the mixture of roses in full bloom and something else dark and sinfully mysterious, definitely feminine. Noticing that she was staring at him again, Gary cleared his throat and stuffed both of his hands in his pockets. For two weeks, she had consumed his mind, no matter where he was or what he was doing; she was always sneaking into his mind, occupying most of his thoughts in some way or another. Didn't matter whether he shoved the thought of her, to the back of his mind in a far off corner or buried under the daily routine, she was still lingering around the edges of other thoughts.

His eyes lowered to her lips, and he questioned, would she taste like she did the first time two weeks ago? Feeling her lips move under his, accepting and surrendering to him. His hands moving over her, memorizing the shape and contour of her body, coax her closer skin to skin, heat to heat. Sliding into her, the joining of two

hearts and souls. To become one for life. Gary felt a shudder start at his feet on the last thought, and work its way up. But he couldn't seem to stop, even knowing the thoughts would only keep him awake at night. Like that would be something new. "Maybe it's time I did something about it." Not realizing he had spoken his last thought out loud, Gary's dark smoky eyes moved back up and locked onto the emerald green eyes that had been haunting his sleepless nights.

"What do you need to do something about?" Lena said. The heat that coursed through her body every time she laid eyes on him made her edgy, aware of the fact that she was staring at him again, something she couldn't seem to stop herself from doing every time she saw him. "I better get Rich in his stall." Looking at her watch, "I have a date tonight." She finished saying in a vague tone, her mind focused on what he had just been thinking. Whatever it was had him looking at her in an odd way. Something along the line of want and desire, Lena barely controlled the gasp that was almost out, *stop thinking about that, damn it*, what was her problem? She should not be thinking like that, even her mind was getting unruly. The thought, of Gary feeling something like that, sent liquid warmth all through her body. Centering in her lower belly and had the blood humming nicely in her veins. Hoping he didn't notice she was blushing even harder now, Lena nuzzled Rich's neck till the warmth of the blush had faded before taking the lead rope from him to led Rich to his stall.

"Who are you going on a date with?" Her abrupt announcement of going on a date tonight made him feel unreasonably angry, which he was damn sure wasn't a good thing. Trying to keep his tone casual his gut clenched at the thought of Lena with another man.

Looking over her shoulder with a sexy feline smile, green eyes glittering with mischief, one she'd been practicing, just for him. "Who wants to know?" Lena tossed over her shoulder. She knew she was baiting him and why not? Why should men be the only ones to seduce and charm the opposite sex?

"I do." Gary said following her to Rich's stall. He knew it was a mistake. In the first place, she was his boss or well her mother was. *So they think.*

Lena slid Rich's halter off, and turned so she was face to face with Mr. sexy himself. She let her gaze slowly, like a caress, track down from his stormy gray eyes, to the set of a stubborn chin. The way he stood, tall and arrogant with his arms crossed, legs spread and feet firmly planted, ready for battle.

Her gaze slowly, wandering back up his magnificent body. Her heart fluttered lightly in reaction to looking closely at his body. Placing the halter on the peg outside the stall door, just for effect she jutted her chin out and placed her hands on her hips, with a voice drenched in sarcasm Lena ask, "So now what I do and who I do it with is your business? Not in this life time. Gary if you haven't noticed I'm a grown woman. Single, healthy and I don't need nor do I want a baby-sitter."

If she was a braver woman, she would have poked him in his well defined chest with her finger. But, Lena knew she wasn't that brave, even saying her little speech sounded stupid to her ears, besides she couldn't be sure her hands would stop at a poke. Her luck her hands would be fisted in his hair dragging him down for another kiss like before.

"That's beside the damn point, Lena." Damn it all to hell, did she have to smell so good all the time? Even in the middle of the damn barn with all of the other smells of liniments, manure, alfalfa hay and grain. He hadn't been able to get her out of his head, not since that first night at the diner where she'd been having dinner and drinks with her girl friends.

Gary wasn't giving her the chance to escape this time. He grabbed her by the shoulders in the door way of the stall and pulled her hard against his chest, and crushed her lips under his. He wanted to make sure that while she was on her date she would think of him. *Only him!*

He plundered her lips, a kiss of possession, marking her. *She is mine and only mine*; as these thoughts zipped through Gary's mind, nearly blinded him with fury, the thought of another man touching her. This wasn't how he wanted to do this. He wanted to be gentle, take her to dinner where there was candle light, soft music and dancing. He changed the angle of the kiss, his tongue stroking hers, and gentled his hold on her as he pulled her closer, god she fit him like a dream. He felt her soften, body yielding. Something was different; he didn't know what it was, just that it

made him want nearly to the point of begging. Gentling his kiss, he felt he was sinking deeper into her. Tasting her sweet soft lips, first with his tongue then nibbling on her bottom lip before he slipped in, to dance a seductive step, tongue to tongue. Gary had dreamed this so many times he had stopped counting. She was filling his head with only thoughts of her and her scent.

Tasting her with his tongue again to log the memory for future moments when he was without her. Mesmerized by the taste and feel, Lena's soft moan was caught in his mouth, he knew then. He was completely lost in her.

Damn he tasted so good, dark and hot Lena thought. He smelled like spice, sweat and a misty forest of pine, the unmistakable sent of a man. Wanting to show him, he was not the only one who could play this little game. Lena ran her hands up his chest, and felt his nipples harden at her touch. She could hear the rumbling groan start deep in his chest.

Long hard thighs, excellent shoulders and biceps, hearing his breath catch in his throat, made the muscles in her stomach knot with the feelings of unreleased passion she had been trying to ignore, want and desire. Yes, aches and needs she'd never felt before coursed through her body, of its own volition, she strained against him to get more, felt more.

No one had ever kissed her so thoroughly it felt she was the only one with the cure for this insatiable need and hunger. Lena knew she needed to end this, though she was uncertain of the reasons. Returning to nibble at his lips, she heard him sigh. How could she of known it would be like this?

Her head was lightly spinning. Lena couldn't think after kissing him, everything had gone soft and fuzzy around the edges. Under the hand she had placed on his chest, she could feel his heated skin beneath his shirt and felt his heart racing. Just the way she wanted him. Feeling his arms tighten around her waist and pull her closer, Lena fought for control. Shoving him back he released her, and at that moment she realized her knees had turned to jelly, grabbing for the stall door she nearly sank to the floor.

When had her knees gone to jelly? Well, that will teach her to play with fire. She could feel his rapid heartbeat under her hand, feeling smug because it matched her own heart rate. The smile that

spread across her face was not practiced but unexpected and telling herself it was time to go was not making her feet move.

"Are you just going to stand there, or are you going to answer me?" Gary demanded. His was voice, raspy and little more than a whisper.

"What, you started it, so I finished it. Do you have a problem with that?" Deciding not to give him time to answer, Lena was afraid her body might betray her and lean into him for another kiss. "Well I'm off to my date. Bye, Bye Gary, see you in the morning." She said with a little wave of her fingers, scooted around him and walked away, hoping she looked relaxed with not a care in the world. Which was not how she felt. No, she felt singed.

Trying not to laugh until she was out of the barn and hearing range. Lena, nearly fell to the ground, man o' man the look on his face after the table was turned on him, was worth a million dollars, to bad she didn't have a camera handy. Whistling, she willed herself to feel relief, as she stopped on the walk away; she loved the beginning of spring. Look at the flowerbeds, where jasmine and Roses and whatever her mom took a liking to at the nursery, were planted. Feeling very pleased, truth or lie, mostly lie, to have finally won a round with Mr. Sexy; she stopped to smell the wonderful flowers her mom had planted just outside the back door a few days ago. Realizing what she was doing was a cliché, Lena smiled.

Climbing the three steps on the back porch knowing he was watching her, Lena looked over her shoulder towards the open shed row of the barn. He was there, leaning against the doorway with one boot crossing the other propped up on the toe. Smiling at him one last time with her new feline smile, she opened the back door and glided into the mudroom, closing the door softly. The mudroom smelled like a new batch of cookies baking.

"Hmmm. Chocolate" Lena said, kissing her mom on the cheek as she grabbed a chocolate chip cookie off the cooling rack. "The three of us girls are going out tonight, so I'll be home late. Don't wait up, you know that chair of yours gives you a kink in your neck when you fall asleep in it."

After one glance at Lena's flushed face; Anna was wondering what had put the roses in her cheeks. "Be careful, all three of you. I

heard on the news at lunchtime that serial killer, what did they call him? Oh yes, the East Coast Lover. Anyway, the police have found another body. They didn't release the name of the victim during the press conference on TV. So please, promise me you girls will be very careful?"

"I promise we'll be very careful, mom. We're just going to the Rhinestone for ladies night."

"Oh, well have a good time then honey." Anna said and decided that if Gary didn't have plans for the night, she would drop a few suggestive hints.

"We will mom, I'll see you in the morning, love you."

"Love you too and tell Jess I love her."

Already half way up the stairs, Lena yelled down, "Okay I will." So what to wear, entering her room and heading straight to the closet, Lena checked the contents of her closet. "I guess I'll just wear my usual, blue jeans and a t-shirt." Not that she had much else in there to choose from.

After showering, Lena rubbed the rose scented lotion on her arms and legs. Slipped into her clothes in front of the mirror, then began running the brush through her long red, wavy hair that stopped just above her lower back. Applying the usual makeup, eyeliner, mascara, powder and lip-gloss, Lena nodded a good-to-go nod to herself in the mirror. "That looks good to me."

Dressing to please her-self was so much easier, comfort and convenience at all times. Walking into her bedroom she could smell the fresh flowers her mom had put on the dresser and nightstand, a mixture that always reminded her of nights in the spring after a cleansing rain.

Slipping her purse strap over her shoulder she headed back down stairs, and decided to go through the kitchen on her way out. "Lena give these to Jess, since she didn't come home today, you know how she loves chocolate chip cookies." Her mom said, as she stopped to give her a kiss on the cheek.

"Mom, if she eats these, she'll fuss about her figure for two months. Looking in very mirror, she comes across." Lena said and let out a sigh of surrender while looking at her mom. Knowing she would take the cookies to Jess, though Jess no longer lived with them on the farm, Jess was still a part of the family. One she

continued to feel a driving need to protect. From what she didn't know.

Handing the cookies to Lena, Anna kisses her on the cheek, "Tell Jess she needs to come for dinner, I miss her, now scat I have work to do."

"Knowing I can't change your mind when it's set on something. You know Jess will insist I help her eat these." Lena said looking back over her shoulder as she open the door to the mudroom and stepped through the doorway and rammed full body into Gary.

The bag of cookies she was carrying in her right arm crunched, now lodged between her arm and chest. "Now look what you've done..." Lena complained her eyes jerking up to meet his.

Looking down into her green eyes and noticing the frosty tone, Gary thought to himself, *Hmmmm...!!* What a combination Roses and Chocolate chips, he tried to ignore the punch of electricity in his mid section that was now happily coursing through his veins. Realizing, a little too late, his hands had settled on both sides of her rib cage, just below her breast, his thumbs brushing up and down as if they had a mind of their own.

Looking through the doorway into the mudroom, Anna had seen it all happen and wondered if those two could feel the sparks in the air when they were in the same room. *Umm!* Before she could control her imagination, Anna was happily planning a wedding, after sighing to herself. There had been several reasons for hiring Gary two weeks ago. The trainer they had before posting the position on their website, Teddy Franklin, had been with them for twelve years. Then Ted up and decided it was time he relocated at the age of sixty-five. Was it fate or a coincidence that everything was happening so quickly?

Gary Wellington, what most women would call tall dark and handsome. He had called to set up an interview, arrived promptly, and all of his references checked out. His former female employers respected and missed him. Anna could admit to herself, he was very nice to look at and since then, she had almost given up on the idea of those two getting together. With a smile spreading across her face Anna thought to herself, maybe they will after all, just putting them on the farm and working together almost every day. Anna had hoped it would be enough, if they would quit being stubborn and playing hard to get. She could have some

grandchildren, preferably sooner rather than later. Not wanting to be caught spying, Anna turned to put another sheet of peanut butter cookies in the oven, she might not be looking, but she was definitely listening.

Lena glared up at Gary, with a cool get-the-hell-out of my way look, she didn't want him to know the kiss out in the barn had left her shaken and wanting something more, something she wasn't sure would leave her whole in the end or even sure of what to call it? What was she feeling? "Would you please let me by. Remember, I have a date? And I don't want to be late." With what she hoped was a smug look on her face, Lena flicked her hair over her shoulder and stepped around him. Only to be brought back around by a hand on her upper arm with an unbreakable grip. His fingers tightened in warning, a warning that put a spark to her natural red-head fire.

Grabbing her arm and pulled her back around to face him. "Who?" Was all Gary said. Always cool under pressure, he'd never let his temper lose, up until now. He was having problems dealing with this frustration; she seemed to make him feel. He didn't want to look too closely at those feeling, Jealousy being an ugly monster, when it reared its big ugly head.

Surely not Jealousy, was that what he was feeling? No way, he didn't have a jealous bone in his body. Gary thought, but the longer Lena took to answer, the worse it got. The feelings and emotions were crashing into each other, with such velocity, he wondered if she could hear the actual crashes taking place. He pushed that aside for a later thought, he would have to examine.

When Lena winced, Gary realized he was squeezing her arm. Releasing her, he let his hand drop to his side. He felt like a complete and total ass when Lena rubbed at the spot where he had held her arm. "I didn't mean to hurt you, sorry about that."

Looking up at him with a smirk on her face, Lena decided not to say anything at all and walked out. Slamming the door on her way out gave her great satisfaction. At least she wasn't going to be late, because of him. Deciding that she would think about him later, Lena wondered what Jessica would say? And Lena sincerely hoped she didn't get burned while playing with fire.

The Matthews Farm being ten minutes from Jessica's and twenty minutes to the beach was great. Jess was lucky to find this place before it went on the market. Buying it from the Petersons saved her a lot of money and financing headaches. And her attorney had handled everything for her, privately. *Two years*, had it really been that long since Jess moved out of the house.

Pulling into the driveway, she had to stop at the security guards hut, in order to get the two twelve-foot iron gates opened. Poking his head out the window, Jack Bernard, thirty-six years old with sandy blond hair and such a friendly manner he put everyone at ease. "Hey, Jack."

"Hello Miss Matthews."

As the gates opened, she waved and pulled through, in her rear view mirror; she could see the big gates start to close behind the truck. It always looked like they were going to hit the rear fenders of her Ford Dooley.

Lena sighed and relaxed in her seat, putting voice to her thoughts. "I love this house," The big rap around porch with two rocking chairs just to the right of the big solid oak front door. To the left was a porch swing and all the way around the house were flowerpots set out here and there, not just one kind of flowering plant, but a variety blooming at different times of the year. The light gray stone of the house was beautiful all the way around, with high arching windows on the east side where the kitchen and dining room started, flowing into the sunken in living room, with a fireplace on the south wall.

Nestled in the corner just under the balcony was a big bay window with a seat for curling up on, on a rainy day. A cathedral ceiling revealed a wide open balcony up above where the four bedrooms were located. The staircase leading up sat just to the right when you came in the front door, wide & curving a little to the left accenting the west wall of the living room.

Jessica had fallen madly in love with the house and thirty acres it sat on.

Pulling up next to the Z3 parked in front of the house, Lena opened the truck door and inhaled all the different smells. It troubled her that even now, Gary's sent was still lingering in her nose and on her clothes. She put all thoughts of him out of her mind. She would not think about what he made her feel tonight.

Closing the truck door, she heard Jess's Saint Bernard, Lela bark. Looking around not knowing where the big dog was, Lena was certain she was about to be plowed over by the two hundred twenty five pound fur ball. She started for the porch at a fast walk, but it was too late.

Huffing and puffing, Lela the fur ball jumped and knocked her to the ground for some slobbery puppy kisses. Laughing until her sides were sore, she wrestled with Lela until they were both panting and breathless. Lela rolled away and began running around the truck in circles, then spinning around to chase her tail.

"Are you two going to come in, or stay outside and play?" Jess said from the porch.

"She started it." Lena accused, still trying to brush the dirt off her jeans.

"Yeah, yeah, Likely story, blame it on the dog."

Lela continued looking at Lena as she sidling up beside Jess woofing twice in protest, she never actually barked, with her tail thumping the porch. The innocent puppy, always blamed. Ruffling, the hair on her head, "Yes, you're a good girl, we know its Lena's fault, she always starts it." Head and tail high Lela trotted into the house to her favorite middle of the living room spot and flopped-down. She could see and hear pretty much everything from this spot. Including the kitchen, should anything hit the floor and need to-be cleaned up.

"What's bothering you?" Lena said.

A look of puzzlement and wariness passed over Jessica's face so fast she almost missed it. Crossing her long legs, Lena decided she would just wait her out. In the past, brow beating Jessica had turned out fruitless. Patients were the key to getting her to talk.

Jessica waved off the question. "Maybe it's nothing. We need to get going if we're going to met Jane at the club."

Lena glanced down at the dirt smudges on front of her jeans and groaned. "I'll need the extra pair of jeans I have here, these are toast."

"You know where they are. While you're changing I'm calling Jane so she can grab a table if she gets there first." Jessica said while mentally thanking the gods for the diversion of clean clothes. She'd had the same nightmare the last two nights and a dreadful

feeling something bad had already happened or was fixing to happen. She truly hoped it was her imagination.

Lena slid into the passenger side of Jessica's little red car. "If we leave the top down, my hair is going to be wild and untamable for the rest of the night." Before going upstairs to change she had seen the worried look on Jessica's face. Jessica hadn't said anything about Bradley, the ex-boyfriend calling or trying to get through the gates in over a week, which left Lena to wonder what, was causing her to worry.

Glancing at Lena, Jess raised an are-you-serious arched brow. "Your hair's always wild and untamable." Pulling through the gates, "have a good night Jack." Jessica said as she flicked her security guard a wave.

"You too Miss Lane, Miss Mathews." Jack called in return.

"He has a crush on you!" Lena remarked knowing it would make her smile.

Jessica laughed, "No he doesn't, he's engaged to a pretty girl in one of his college classes." Turning right out of her driveway, she head for the lively town of Daytona.

"Guess that means we're leaving the top down?" Rolling her eyes sky ward in resignation, her hair, nearly waist length with a natural wave, hence the wild and untamable.

"You bet" Winking, at Lena in the passenger seat, she flicked on the CD player.

CHAPTER THREE

Flipping open his cell, Gary dialed Stevens number. "Come on." Knowing that Lena had gone to Jessica's house, Gary hoped he could catch Stevens before he was caught watching Miss Lane's house. Anna had told him where they were going. The three women were going out for ladies night at the Rhinestone club. Gary had noticed the lively sparkle in her eyes as she talked, and realized she was playing her hand at match making. That was fine by him.

Crouched down in the seat of his car, Stevens pushed the speaker button on his cell. "Stevens."

"Are you still in the same spot?"

"Yes, hmm... What have we here, looks like we are going on an outing? The woman with the red hair is with Jessica and their headed my way. They must be going into town; soon as they pass I'll follow."

"Give them plenty of distance; I don't want them to find out your tailing them."

"Not my first day on the J.O.B. Gary. Where are you anyway, you left before breakfast this morning?"

"I got a J.O.B., as you put it." The last few days of working in close proximity of Lena and nothing new to help find the killer had his priorities shifting slightly.

"Why would you do that? You don't need a job, you already have two remember?"

"We'll talk about it later. After you see me pull up behind you, where ever we end up, I'll cover so you can grab a shower and change."

"Do you know where they're going?"

"I was given an idea where they might be going. Follow them, I'm right behind you."

Lena checked out the parking. "Damn this place is packed tonight. There's Jane's car over there, jeez parking's at a premium to."

Jess pulled into a spot about ten parking spaces down from Jane. "Could be worse, any later and we would've been parking across the street at the beach parking lot." She looked across the street as they both got out of the car.

"It looks kinda creepy at night doesn't it, even though it has lights?" Lena said after a chill went zipping down her spine, creepy like someone was watching her. Taking her purse from the floorboard of the car she slung the strap over her shoulder, as she came around the car and hooked her arm through Jessica's.

"At least the line isn't too long." Jess noted.

"I'm ready for a cold beer and some loud music. Wonder if Jane got a table for us?"

Pushing her long thick hair back over her shoulder, she pressed the alarm button on her key before dropping it in to her purse. Hearing the chirp of the car alarm Jess added a little prayer that no one would scratch it or crash into it. "Yes she did, her car is parked over there." Jess pointed a few cars over to Jane's car.

"Quit worrying, the car will be fine out here with the rest of the cars."

"I know but I still worry." Jessica said as they were getting in line to pay the cover charge, still chatting with each other not paying attention to the other cars pulling into the parking lot.

Backing into a parking space two down from the little red car, Stevens was toying with the idea of buying one for him-self. Searching the line for the Blonde and Red head, he shook his head, "Damn, look at all these hot women, what kinda place is this, women's only club?" Spotting the Jag as it pulled in, he flashed his lights to get Gary's attention.

Stevens climbed out of the car to stretch his long cramped legs, just as Gary stopped at the front of his car. Noticing the passenger window was down; he leaned in to find out what was going on. "They just went inside, lines moving pretty fast. From the looks of things, if we're going in we had better hurry." He said, sniffing the air inside the Jag, "Hot date tonight?"

"No, I'll keep watch while you go clean up, and you'd better hurry it up to, I want a beer myself."

Slapping the roof of the Jag, "We'll do" Stevens said getting back in his car. He pulled out of the parking space, glancing in the rear view to see the Jag take his spot.

"Over there, I see her." Jess said. The club was filling up fast as it always does on ladies night.

Lena smiled over at Jane, "Hey woman, where have you been hiding?" The three of them had grown up together here in Daytona. Her and Jess hadn't seen or heard from Jane for several weeks now.

"Jane it's good to see you." Jessica said as she pulled a chair out to sit.

"I need a new job, this marketing thing sucks. Chase this client, revise my ad and sweet-talk him into taking a bigger ad out in the next issue." Jane said with a roll of her eyes. Holding out her arms for a hug from both, "Damn, you two are going to leave a wake of men crying tonight!" The three of them have had a longstanding agreement; they go out together, they leave together.

Five minutes later, standing at the bar, Jane waited to order their first round of drinks. She had grabbed the last table in a corner next to the dance floor, and they had a nice view of everyone, some dancing, others mingling.

After Jane made it back to their table and handed Jess her drink, Lena said, "Boy, we got lucky, As long as the line is outside, another thirty minutes and this place will be wall to wall bodies."

Raising her drink and laughing, "Let the rodeo begin." Jane cheered.

Lena sat down after two songs of Texas 2 stepping around the dance floor, and propped her boots on the chair across from her. Leaning back in the chair, she wondered what kind of trouble they could get into tonight. She scanned the crowd over at the bar, while she was waiting for Jane to get back with their next round of drinks. Her feet were starting to move with the beat of the music. Lena loved to dance, listen to loud music and have a few beers with friends, every now and then.

For the last couple of months though she'd been feeling restless and out of sorts, like something was missing from her life. God

help her if Gary Wellington was that something. Even though she had not dated anyone in, well that was too long to think about.

Taking a cigarette out of the pack, she lit it, just as Jane sat an icy cold bud in front of her with a shot of tequila. Dropping both feet back to the floor, Lena eyed the shot of tequila. "That's one hell of a way to start the night off." Tapping the ashes in the ashtray and leaving the cigarette laying on the edge she picked up her drink. "So what are we drinking to on this fine night?"

"Men, God bless them all!" Jane said, as she salted her hand to follow the burning path of tequila. Sending a wink at Jess, knowing she hated hard liquor. Jane raised her shot, at the same time Jess and Lena did. "To the blessed men, in the tight wranglers all slicked up after a hard day's work." Jane said, followed by the clinking of the three glasses, before the content was downed in one fiery gulp.

Patting herself on the chest she sucked the salt off her hand and then bit into the lime hoping the tequila wouldn't burn a hole right through her stomach lining. Jess was shaking her head no, as Jane motioned for another shot. "That's it for me, beer only. I, Jess, need no more fire water." She said putting up one hand to hold Jane off from getting them all three plastered before they'd even been there an hour.

Jessica glanced over at Lena and watched her scan the crowd. She always sat with her back to the wall. Was she afraid someone might sneak up on her and catch her by surprise? Relaxing back in her own chair it figures Jane would get a table as close to the dance floor and music as possible. Shrugging to herself mentally, who cared tonight? As long as they had fun and just maybe the ear blasting music would drown out her worries.

Still sitting in the Jag drumming his fingers on the stirring wheel, "What the hell is taking so long? Gary growled. "Screw it I'm going in." Taking the keys from the ignition he got out of the car, and set the alarm before shoving the keys down his front pants pocket. Noticing Stevens jogging across the street he stopped on the sidewalk to wait for him. "Where did you go to shower, Georgia?"

"Funny smart ass care to tell me why you're all slicked up if you don't have a hot date?"

"It's none of your damn business even if you're writing a book?"

Gary didn't take teasing on the best of days, especially about women. Shrugging he didn't care, "Just wondering that's all. Here I brought your Stetson since this is a country kinda club. We should feel right at home."

Pulling open the door, Charlie Daniels was heating up the fiddle and daring the devil, the line ahead of them was only four people deep now so they were inside, "For the wise crack, you get to pay the cover charge for both of us, nice Stetson by the way and thanks for bringing mine." Gary was beginning to feel impatient from waiting and not knowing what was going on inside the club.

Stevens handed over the two twenties and put his wallet back in his pocket as he followed Gary to the bar. "You're buying the first round then. I'll have a beer."

Motioning for the bartender's attention and he signal for two beers. Turning back to the crowd, there was a solid wall of people standing around the dance floor to his left. The wall stopped at the scattering of tables for those who preferred to sit and watch. The music was loud, but you could still hear the person close to you if you wanted to carry on a conversation. Sliding the money for the beers over before he picked up his, bringing the bottle to his lips, he turned back to scan the crowd for Lena. Taking a sip of his beer, he spotted her sitting at a table with the other two women. The same two she was with at the diner. Just like her mother had told him. He would have to thank her tomorrow. Stevens, with his back to him, moved over and blocked his view. Something had caught his attention.

Lena sat back in her chair to people watch and prayed she didn't have one of her dream spells, as she sipped her beer. Checking out the fine wranglers at the bar, seeing a familiar face in the crowd, good looking she noted. Well he seemed to be staring at someone.

Lena glanced around trying to track his gaze, when she realized he was staring at Jessica sitting next to her. *Well, well.* She wiggled her eyebrows at Jane to get her attention and failed. Laughing out loud, she wondered how her friend was going to handle this man staring at her, since he didn't look like he was going to keep the distance between them for much longer. "Check out 9 o'clock girls. At the bar, he's looking your way Jess." Lena said, and

waved in the man's direction. "Maybe he wants to dance?" Still laughing she looked at Jessica. Lena watched Jessica's eyebrows draw together, as if she recognized the guy staring at her.

"Hello, care to spill the beans on the Marlboro man over there?" Lena said, looking back at the cowboy.

"I seen him this morning at the grocery store and Tuesday when I was leaving the beach, he was parked three spaces over from my car.

Laughing at the crinkled look on Jess's face, Jane said, "Maybe he's a secret admirer."

Shrugging it off, Jess looked away from the guy now leaning on the bar.

"Maybe he's new in town Jess." Lena was still looking at the cowboy when he moved over to lean back on the bar, that's when she noticed Gary, damn it what's he doing here? No, giving herself a mental shake, *I am not going there*, "Let's heat this place up girls!"

Not paying the thought any more attention, the trio stepped out onto the dance floor for a line dance.

Moving to the steps of the Electric slide, the dancers were close enough to each other to bump shoulders if they were not paying attention. Losing her balance as someone shoved her forward. Lena plowed into the guy in front of her. Quickly gaining her footing on the slick floor, she apologized to him and turned to see what had happened, and who had shoved her. The dancing had stopped and the tempers were quickly flaring out of control. Looking for the cause, and bracing for a possible fight, Lena move closer to Jessica and Jane. "Who the hell did that?"

"I don't know, we were all turning when someone shoved you from behind." Jess said.

Scanning the mingling dancers, who were trying to get back into step before the song ended, Lena hadn't realized Gary was standing beside her, until she caught the scent of him. Without looking at him, she said, "We don't need your help, big guy."

"To bad, you're getting it anyway. Are you okay?" Taking her by the arm he turned her. "I'm not here to fight with you Lena, are you Okay?"

Huffing out a breath, her heart rate was returning to normal, well as normal as possible standing this close to him. "Yeah, I'm good. Did you see who shoved me?"

"No, the dance floor is pretty packed; I'm surprised you didn't take out more than one person." Hearing the song change, to a slow dance, he raised one eyebrow in question, "Would you like to dance since we're still standing on the dance floor?"

"I don't think that's a good idea." Moving back out of the way, Lena looked around for Jane and Jessica and found them already back at their table. Her friends, the traders, had left her to fend for herself. She looked down at Gary's hand still possessing her arm and then looked into his eyes. She could feel herself sinking into those dark slate gray eyes, as they stood only a few inches from each other. His hand slid down her arm, sending her unruly system into total over drive, "Why the hell not, though you may regret it before the end of the night?"

"Not in this life time." Since Stevens had gone back to the bar, keeping some distance between him and Jessica. Gary made sure he kept Stevens in his range of sight just in case something happen, his body language was very expressive when there was any kind of threat around. Pulling her body closer, Gary tormented himself by being in close proximity of her. Taking her arms by the wrist he placed her hands on his shoulders. Looking into those deep green eyes, "Try to pretend you're enjoying this just a little, I promise not to bit unless you ask me to."

"Why did you follow me here Gary?"

Shifting her slightly closer, their thighs were rubbed against each other. "Who says I did?"

Lena's body was starting to heat, her system humming a different tune now altogether. "Don't answer a question, with a question? It's irritating."

"Okay, first agree to another dance, and then I'll answer your question."

She mentally sighed to herself. "Okay one more dance and that's it." A girl could only take so much at one time.

Did she know how beautiful she was? Probably, most women with strike me dead beauty, knew and they used it often. Though she seemed different, he didn't know her well enough to say. Hoping for a two-step to put some room between them and cool his

overheated system down a couple of degrees. No such luck, George gave way to Brooks & Dunn's Neon Moon. A waltz, well that was better than a poke in the eye. Keeping eye contact, Gary took her arms by the wrist, to change the position of their bodies, to accommodate the steps of a ballroom dance. Noticing the other dancers do the same, he raised a questioning eyebrow at Lena.

"Yes, I can waltz. The question is can you lead or should I take it from here?"

A low growl came from his throat, the woman was in for some surprises. Her hair was down and free; it reminded him of a live fire. Shimmering and waving, with those emerald eyes throwing out the challenge.

The whole package, threatening his system with every breath she took. Gary slid his big hand to the small of her back. Pulling her not so gently against him, if she wanted war fine he'd give her a war and damn the both of them. He took her other hand, raised it slightly higher and away to lead. "Hang on to your boot leathers honey; we're fixin to burn the rug everyone else is cutting."

The cowboy drawl made Lena's heart skip a beat; she had a second to wonder if she was in over her head. In the game she had started. Then the DJ started the song over, only about five seconds of the music had played.

"It's time to waltz everyone." The DJ said.

Belt buckle to belt buckle, step for step, Lena was afraid if she broke eye contact she would trip over her own two feet. Damn, but the man could dance. The breath was backing up in her lungs again, and she had to remind herself to breath, slowly as they came to a turn in the dance floor. *Surly not, he is not going to twirl me around, oh no...*

Leaning on each other watching Lena and the big sexy looking man she was dancing with. "Damn Jess look at them. I didn't know Lena could dance like that, did you?" Jane asked fanning her-self, "Just watching them move like that is making me hot."

Wincing even as she seen Gary's intentions, "Holy cow he's twirling her, look at that. Boy, she is going to be so pissed when she comes off the dance floor. Look at the way he's holding her, from belly button to thigh so they move as one." Jess said in awe of her best friend. Seeing a slight movement out of the corner of

her eye, Jess turned to see what had caught her attention from the dancers, instantly she tensed up at the sight of Bradley coming toward her or maybe, she hoped the dance floor. The look in his eyes was cold and mean. Jessica shivered in fear and passed memories raced through her mind.

Noticing Jessica's head turned from the dance floor, Jane glanced over to see the Bastard Brad, as she liked to call him coming their way. Jess stood and Jane moved closer to her, neither of them saw the man walk up behind them, tower over them, glaring at the man making his way toward them.

The whoring bitch had a new man did she, we'll just see about that. Stalking closer, his big fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. A black rage, the likes of which he had never known grew thick in his mind, a black unforgiving fog, pumped through his veins, His woman. The voices in his head taunted. No other man was to touch his woman. The whoring bitch, he would teach her a lesson now for sure, thinking she could dump him, and humiliate him in public.

Jessica stood rooted to the same spot she'd been standing in when she had seen Bradley come in to the club. Her mind and body shivering with fear at what she saw in his eyes, they were like frozen lifeless ice blue glaciers. Everything around her dropped away. She was trapped and alone again with this evil person. She wanted to run, scream for help, but her body refused to obey.

Still out on the dance floor in the middle of the waltz of his life, Gary twirled Lena around, her hair swinging out as he brought her back against him to turn. Live silky wires flaming back to wrap around his shoulder.

Nearing the table, the three women had occupied, he saw Jessica stand. At the sight of Stevens rigid body Gary sidestepped off the dance floor as if practiced, with Lena still in his arms. Stopping beside Stevens holding Lena in place at his side, she started to struggle trying to free herself.

"Let me go Gary" The hiss of her voice, brought his attention back to her. She had to get Jessica away from that evil bastard. Shoving against Gary's side Lena tried to break his hold. She had to protect Jess, her sister.

"No, there will be no fighting here tonight I'll see to that. I promise."

Now that she was paying attention to his body, pressed tightly to hers, Lena could feel his muscles quivering with a need for release. His jaw muscles clenching and unclenching. She glanced over at Jess, and saw how pale she looked, like a deer caught in the headlights. Her eyes big and glazed over with fear, "Jessica, look at me." Lena pleaded hoping Jess could hear her over the music, unable to reach Jessica in her current position, being tucked under Gary's right shoulder.

The tension coming off Gary and the guy on his left, the same one they had called the Marlboro Man earlier, was drawing attention to them. Placing her hand on Jane's right shoulder, she also seemed to be in a trance, for Jane didn't even move or acknowledge the hand on her shoulder. Before she could say Jessica's, name again, The Marlboro Man stepped between Jessica and Jane, to stand in front of her sister and best friends. The air in the room around them was so thick with the tension, it was making her nervous.

"Jessica, Look at me now!" Still no response, looking up at Gary trying to read his expression, with her arm that was still wrapped around Gary's waist, Lena pinched him on his side, waiting for him to look down.

"What?" He said without taking his eyes from Stevens and the other man, Bradley Jacobs.

"Turn Jessica around and move her over to me, please I can't stand to see her like this."

Slowly, using his left hand, he gently pulled Jessica by her arm backward not daring to take his attention off Stevens. The man liked nothing better than a good brawl and the place or time didn't matter much to Stevens. "Move around behind me Lena and stay there."

Doing as she was told, grated some. They would discuss it later; right now Jessica's safety was her top priority. Carefully she took Jessica's face in her hands and turned her head, to break her eye contact with Bradley. "Jess, look at me baby. Its okay he will not do anything here. We can leave right now if that's what you want?" She patted Jess on the cheek, trying to break her out of the trance. Wondering if she was in shock, Lena moved them further

back away from the men, snagging Jane's arm and pulling her along, as she went.

"The whore is mine. Move aside, now." Bradley shouted at the two men standing in front of him. His rage was black and blinded him to any public etiquette; he wasn't paying much attention to them. The taller one standing just behind the one directly in front of him hadn't said anything.

Body coiling tighter, Stevens stared the man dead in the eye, waiting for his move. "Come on, just one and I'll take you out myself." Stevens growled back at the man standing in front of him. The crowd was starting to notice them. It was like an old western movie standoff. "Turn around and walk out on your own. Is option one, or option two, and my favorite, I take you out myself."

He focused on the man standing directly in front of him, he had no more than whispered his threat. The tone snapped Bradley back to reality. He noticed the people standing around them listening and watching, just waiting for someone to make their move. Looking beyond the man's shoulder to where his beloved Jessica stood with her back to him. "It's time to go Jessica, come with me NOW!" He demanded. Looking the nasty little slut, next to Jessica dead in the eye, "Lena you get your filthy hands off her, she's leaving with me." Not realizing he had moved or caring, Bradley took an aggressive step forward. He would go through both men and anyone else that stepped in his way.

Faster than the blink of an eye, Stevens hand snaked out. Fingers like steel bands wrapped around the asshole's neck with a deadly accuracy and an even more deadly grip. "So it's to be option two is it, Sucks for you." Stevens pressed slightly on the man's esophagus with his thumb and yanked him closer, now nearly nose to nose to better the man's hearing. Stevens lip curled back as he snarled, "Don't ever call another woman a whoring bitch in my presence," and gave him a hard shake with his hand around Brads neck, to drive his words home. "Save your good byes, you won't be missed." He walked the man backwards toward the door knowing Gary was right behind him, should anyone else try to horn in on his fun?

She couldn't believe what she was seeing. Lena watched Gary follow the other man out the door taking Bradley with them. Her

heart was still pounding. No one had ever offered to stand up for her or her family when there was a problem.

"Holy cow batman, I think I'm in love. Who is the Cowboy?" Jane said dropping herself down in her chair fanning herself with her hand. "He's absolutely prime choice I tell you."

Now recovering more quickly, she was thankful that she was sitting down. Mortified to the marrow of her every bone, Jess wished the floor of the club would open up and swallow her whole. Not daring to look in the direction the three men went. "I'm so sorry Lena, Jane. I'm sorry he ruined our night again."

"Shut the hell up, Jessica. It's not your fault the guy can't take no for an answer. Now, drinks all around girls. We deserve a shot of fire water; I'll be right back with it." Still more shaken than she cared to admit, Lena stalked over to the bar to place their order, "Hey Scott, I'm in desperate need of three shots, fire water." The three of them had been raised in and around Daytona. Scott the bartender had been a year or two ahead of them in school. Watching him pour the drinks, she tossed the money on to the bar. "Thanks for not saying anything to Jessica. She's having a hard time shaking this one lose."

"No problems, if she needs anything just give me a call. And Lena, about your friends, if they're looking for a job as bouncer send them my way. Real quiet, that's how they handled themselves you tell them I appreciate that too, Okay."

"We'll do, Scotty" Giving him a salute before picking up the drinks. Midway back to the table, she cast a weary glance toward the door wondering, where Gary and the other guy had went with Bradley, and why she felt compelled to go protect them or him. Seeing that some of the tension had disappeared from her friends, since they were both laughing like loons. She smiled and plopped herself down in the chair. Lena raised her shot, looking Jane in the eye, "You need to rephrase the toast you made earlier, so what will it be?"

Sitting up straighter, Jane cleared her throat trying not to laugh. Nodding to Jess to pick her shot glass up, raising hers as she did. "Revised version of earlier, God bless most men and may the rest be deep fried in hell!" Another clinking of shot glassed and down the hatch both looking at Jess at the same time. "Let's finish this night off without another thought of misery shall we?"

Knowing Lena was in no mood to take no for an answer, Jessica slid her chair back to stand. Hoping the burning in her chest would cool quickly. "Lead the way, dancing Queen." She motioned toward the dance floor with a wave of her hand.

Narrowing her eyes at Jess then at Jane, "So that's what you're laughing at, me dancing with Gary." The man had some nerve all right yanking her up against his hard body, his hard thigh rubbing her between her thighs and his chest pressing against her breasts. Lena's nipples where so sensitive now, just thinking about him pressing against them, made them grow taunt and hard. Aching to be touched and soothed. Feeling her body heat spike, remembering Gary holding her, he would have to pay for that, and pay dearly he would. She turned for the dance floor, leading the way with a twitching swagger that had the majority of the males in the room focused on her hips. Lena's focus was now solely on the task, dancing and her friend's laughter. Enjoying each other's company they stayed until the place was closing and the lights turned on calling the night to an end.

Walking toward their cars, Lena noticed a man four cars over leaning against the back of the car looking away from them, just smoking a cigarette and minding his own business. The stranger was unfamiliar to her, but he did turn his head slightly in Jane's direction. Opening the passenger side door of Jessica's little car. "Jane, call us sometime and don't be such a stranger, okay." Lena tossed over her shoulder before getting into the car.

"Sure thing," Jane yelled over the roof of her car as she slid in.

"I don't want to talk about it, Lena. Let it rest for tonight, please." Jess asked quietly shutting her car door. The ride back to Jessica's house was a silent one. Embarrassed by her own behavior, did she have so little spine? Knowing Bradley had been abusive in one form or another. The worst part of all was she had allowed it to continue for so long. Two years they had dated, two very long years.

Lena stared out the passenger side window trying hard to respect Jessica's wish, don't talk about it. Humph! Yeah, right. She'd like to kick something. Waving to the night guard as they passed through the gates, sitting in the car after Jess had turned the ignition off. "I'm sorry Jess; I know this is hard for you."

Patting Lena on the arm, "The fear is the worst part."

"Mom wants you to come to dinner tomorrow night, okay."

"Tell her I'll be there, you finish up around the barn at four o'clock still?"

"Yeah, same thing different day," At least she hoped.

Across the street from the club parking lot, leaning against a palm tree Gary had waited not so patiently for the women to get in their cars and head home. Unseen with a clear view from where he was standing Stevens had already returned to the hotel after letting the other man go. They had watched him get into a dark midsize car, unable to get the make and model. Yelling threats about pressing charges against them for assault and battery, he could probably make them stick with the bruises he would likely have where Stevens had latched onto him around the neck, Gary thought as he walked back to the hotel, his Jag already in the parking garage.

"Took you long enough to get back." Stevens said prowling Gary's room like a caged animal.

"Let it go Stevens, he might follow through with his threat about pressing charges against you for assault."

He hadn't had time in the last two weeks to break into the hotel computer system. Tailing the blonde's every move, coming back to the hotel room long enough for a shower and couple hours of sleep. The TV he had turned on when he came in, hoping for some distraction switched to the news. "On tonight's late edition, there will be a brief replay of the press conference held earlier this evening outside the Daytona Police department. Captain Norman released the names of the two latest victims of the East Coast Lover, after these messages." "Christ on a crutch." Stevens jammed his fingers into his hair knocking his Stetson hat to the floor. "Instead of following the blonde, I need time to break in to the hotel's computer system, and track down who's using the credit card and their location."

Gary's attention still focused on the TV waiting for the replay. "We're going to have to speed things up. Before now, there was a longer span of time between killings. Something or someone must have pushed the killer to break out of the earlier pattern." Gary said sitting on the end of the bed directly in front of the TV, when the commercials switched back to the news.

“Good morning, Daytona and welcome to the late edition. If your just joining us, the first segment of this edition is the rebroadcast of yesterday’s press conference held at the Daytona police department.” The screen panned to the smaller screen over the left shoulder of the newscaster. The Captain of the Daytona P.D. was standing at the top of the stairs just outside the front doors with the media crowd in front of him, camera’s flashing, and people talking over each other.

Behind the crowd, media vehicles were parked as far as the local news camera could reach at that angle. Holding up both hands to get the reporters attention the Captain began speaking into the microphones attached to the stand in front of him. “Ladies and Gentlemen, as you know there have been two bodies found in the last two weeks. The families of both were notified earlier this week. While the investigation is still ongoing, we are releasing both of the victims names, and only their names. The first body, Mrs. Michelle Cragg, was found in her home earlier last week. The second body Mrs. Janet Wilson also found in her home.” Raising one hand to hold off the questions hurled at him. “Both cases are under investigation, there will be no questions answered today, thank you for coming.”

The Captain turned and walked quickly back into the police department not giving any attention to the questions hurled at him like heat seeking missiles, with the four men that had been flanking him during the press conference following.

“Go get some rest, Stevens you look like hell.” Checking his watch, it was quarter till six a.m., just as Stevens left slamming the door on his way out. Gary picked up the phone to make an appointment with the Captain. After calling the Daytona P.D. and leaving a message for an appointment with the Captain later in the day, Gary headed for the shower.

Knowing he was going to be late getting out to the farm, he would have to call her to let her know. Thoughts of Lena’s body rubbing against his while they had been dancing had his body hardening quick. Turning the cold water on full blast, hoping like hell it helped to cool him off.

Shoving those thoughts aside, he wondered if he should just dump everything he had on the East Coast Lover in Captain

Normans lap. For two very long years Gary had focused on tracking down the killer that had taken his mother’s life. It had become an obsession with him, unable to rest knowing someone else’s mother was in danger.

CHAPTER FOUR

His hands, rough and long fingered. Touching her everywhere, gliding and caressing, molding her body. His lips, branding her skin everywhere they touched, while his tongue lit a fire, to rage out of control. Moving down to her waiting breasts heavy with a fullness, his tongue finally circling each taunt nipple, hardening with a need so fierce waiting for his touch, it was becoming painful. The aching in Lena breasts fed her passion, spreading to her lower abdomen. Lower to where he had been rubbing while they were dancing locked in each other's arms. She rolled, trying to find some release and tangled herself in the sheets.

"GOOD MORNING Dayton!" Lena's body snapped upright at the rude interruption of the alarm clock. Slapping at the alarm button to turn it off she rubbed her heated face with both hands. "uuck." The taste in her mouth was so vile she nearly gagged, moaning softly she untangled herself from the sheets.

Stumbling to the shower holding her head in both hands, hoping she didn't drop it, as she tried to make it to the bathroom. Whispering to her-self, "You know better," vowing never again. "Please if there is a God, take the drummers away, please." Bracing herself against the wall she turned the shower on. Trying to stay upright, Lena stumbled over to the counter. Taking the aspirin bottle from the medicine cabinet over the sink, praying as she pried the lid from the bottle, she spilled some in the sink in her debilitated state. Dry swallowing them, she hoped they would stay down and work with the speed of sound.

"Never, again Lena." She whispered again and climbed into the shower. Fifteen minutes later, she walked gently down the stairs and into the kitchen where the smell of fresh coffee brewing, made her whimper. Pouring two cups, she took her cup of coffee and one for her mom to the table. Lowering herself gently into the chair, she noticed her mom's unmoving body, her eyes staring and blank. Laying a hand on her arm, bright cold fear sent a shiver down

Lena's spine. "Mom, what is it?" No response. Her mom's breathing was shallow and her skin felt ice cold to the touch. Leaning closer, she wrapped her arms around her mom's shoulders. "Mom, can you hear me, do you want me to call 911? Are you hurt?" Lena whispered and ran her hands briskly up and down, trying to rub some warmth back in to her arms and hands. Thoughts screaming through her mind, how long has she been sitting here like this? Sitting back a little, she took her mom gently by the chin to bring her face around so she could get a good look at her eyes. She watched as a tear slid down her mom's pale cheek.

"M.M...Mrs. C..Cragg, on the news they said." Anna sobbed. An inhuman sound escaped a careening like she had never heard before.

"Mrs. Cragg was on the news?" Lena didn't watch the news because it was depressing to her. "Mom, tell me why Mrs. Cragg was on the news?"

Anna pointed, to the little TV on the counter beside them, unable to talk as the sobs escaped her, racking her body with hard jerks.

Turning on the TV, the constant nagging voice in the back of her mind joined in with the dread pooling in the pit of Lena's stomach making it churn worse than it already was. The reporter repeated parts of the press conference from the day before. "Oh God, Oh no!" Shaking her head, Lena covered her mouth with both hands, as she heard the newscaster say the names of the two dead people. Jumping up from her chair, she ran for the trashcan, as the bile backed up in her throat. Gripping the sides of the trashcan she expelled the contents of her stomach. She wiped her mouth with a wet paper towel her mom handed to her. "There has to be a mistake, mom." Resting her forehead on the counter, she throat felt to raw to do more than whisper, while she tied the trash bag closed and pulled in out of the trashcan, and set it aside. Hoping her stomach would stay settled now that it was empty. Changing the bag in the trashcan took all of her concentration.

Sitting back down in her chair, stabbing at the power button on the TV turning it off, she did not need to hear any more. Mrs. Barns had already called her. "Come sit down Lena. Drink your coffee. There is nothing we can do since Lettie didn't have any family, so we're taking care of the funeral arrangements as soon as they release the body." Anna said.

“Did Mrs. Barns say what happen?” Lena’s mind was numb with shock, the last she’d heard Mrs. Cragg had a new man in her life.

“No, she said that after our meeting last week she’d called Lettie the next day to ask about her date and no one answered the phone. So she walked over to her house, since she lives a couple houses down from her, when Lettie didn’t answer the door she started to worry and called 911, thinking that maybe something was wrong.”

The phone started ringing, and Lena prayed it was not more bad news. Maybe she should let the machine get it, she thought for a second before answering. Knowing her mom would answer instead, “Matthews farm.” Wondering who would be calling this early.

“It’s Gary.” He said, wondering at the wary tone in Lena’s voice when she answered the phone, she sound like she was upset.

Sighing to her-self, “What’s up Gary?” And please no more bad news this early in the morning, she had a hangover and other problems to deal with first.

“Now that’s a loaded question, Lena.” He kept his voice light and teasing.

“Not in the mood for wise cracks Gary.” Lena snapped as she held her head in one hand and the phone in the other. The man was strange, up this early and in a good mood to boot.

“Sorry, I’ll be there in a couple of hours, I have to take care of some business this morning and I wanted to give you a heads up.”

“Thanks for calling, see you later then.” She said and pressed the end button to end the call before he could say anything else.

Scowling at the phone, “she hung up on me.” Gary mumbled to himself. Wondering what was going on out at the farm he closed the cell phone hooked it back on the clip attached to his belt, and heard the shower turn on in Stevens room next door. Putting on his jacket to cover the gun and harness he was wearing. He made sure the door to his room was locked with the do not disturb sign out before going through the interior door that joined his and Stevens rooms.

Sitting at the little table by the patio Gary waited for Stevens to finish his shower while he watched the open laptop running some program, Stevens had some really, cool toys. Figuring it was

probably on auto hacker mode. He leaned back in his chair, as Stevens came out of the bathroom half dressed.

Checking the progress of his laptop, “You didn’t touch it did you?”

“No, wouldn’t dream of messing with one of your cool toys. What’s it doing anyway?”

“Checking the hotel system for a back door, to the main frame,” He hated mornings and for the last few weeks every day had started before seven a.m., there should be a law against it he thought as he pulled on a black t-shirt.

“Finish dressing and make it fast, we’re going over to the Daytona P.D., to meet with Captain Norman,” Gary said.

“Sounds like fun, but what about Blondie?”

“You can catch up with her later,” Gary said leaning back in his chair. Grinning, eyebrows wiggling, “She’s hot.”

“Shove it, man. Don’t go there.” Yeah, yeah, Stevens knew where Gary was going with this line of razzing.

“Hmmm, sounds like love.”

Knowing turnabout was fair play. Did not mean he had to like it. “The damn woman needs a keeper. Flaunting herself out in public half dressed the way she does.”

“You’re hooked, Stevens ole buddy, face it.” Gary laughed as he headed to the door.

Sitting on the hard chairs in the waiting area of the Daytona P.D., it smelt like any other police department Gary thought to himself, stale coffee, industrial strength Lysol and the underlying body odor of missed showers. The sounds of fingers clicking away at keyboards and the ringing of phones, Gary didn’t miss this end of his old job. “Feels like home, every department is almost the same no matter what city or state you’re in.”

“The waiting, I could do without,” Stevens griped as he glanced at his watch. “What’s taking the Captain so long?”

“You know they don’t get in a hurry to see any one questioning a homicide.” Watching the receptionist out of the corner of his eye, she was trying desperately to stem the flow of tears and failing. At the sound of the big booming voice, her body jerked, eyes whipping to them, the only two men occupying the waiting room.

“Send’em in Edna.” The Captain bellowed from the other side of the bullpen.

Giving one last sniffle her voice was squeaky, like a little mouse, “The Captain will see you now Mr. Wellington, Mr. Stevens.”

Two police officers had patted both of them down just inside the front doors; when their guns had set off the alarm as they entered the building. After the two officers were done checking both of the permits to carry a concealed weapon and Gary’s badge, the officers gave them a receipt for the return of their guns before him and Stevens left the building.

They made their way through the bullpen with the little mousy lady leading the way. Eight thirty in the morning and the Captain looked like he hadn’t slept is several days. “Thank you for seeing us on short notice, sir.”

Leaning heavily back in his chair it groan and protest at the angle it was leaning. “I’ve already spoke with your captain, he’s mighty unhappy with your departure.” He commented and pressed his fingers together. “So you’re following the serial killer?”

“Tracking sir,” Gary didn’t wanting to give away to much information about his own investigation he was conducting. “I would like to speak with the detectives working the cases here in Daytona. More specifically are the cases related to the East Coast Lover’s other victims?”

Sighing heavily, “I’ve talked to the detectives working the cases and they’ll be contacting you later today. Now to answer your question, yes, they are the same MO as the others. Though the investigation is still in its early stages, we believe one of them could be a copycat. I would appreciate your help if you have any information pertaining to these cases.”

“I’ll share what I have which may be no more than your detectives already know.”

Taking in the appearance of both men sitting in his office, “You wouldn’t know anything about a confrontation at the Rhinestone last night would you?” Captain Norman said looking directly at Stevens as both of his eyebrows rose.

“No sir, we wouldn’t, did something happen there last night?” Stevens face held no expression; his body appeared relaxed and unmoving, just passing the time with not a care in the world. Gary

knew better, Stevens didn’t have the patients for police procedure. He worked his own way within the boundaries of the law.

“Yes, but no charges were filed. Just a couple of phone calls reporting the incident. You’re both being new in town, wondered if you had anything to do with it.” At the ringing of his phone, “I have to take this. You both better stay out of trouble and keep your noses clean.” One hand reaching for the phone as the other waved them out of his office. “Close the door on your way out, Thanks.”

Stevens pulled the door shut behind him and followed Gary out of the office and through the bullpen.

Life on a horse farm stops for nothing. Not even the death of a long time family friend. Shaking her head, don’t think about it now, Lena muttered to herself. She had finally escaped the confines of the house. Mom and the other women were huddled in the living room comforting each other, over the loss of one of their group. Picking up the phone to call Jessica with the intentions of making sure, she came to dinner tonight. Lena noticed Lenny, one of her grooms standing in the doorway with a strange expression on his face. “Please no more bad news.” Lena groaned.

“Sorry ma’am.” Lenny said shuffling his feet and twisting his cap in his worried hands.

“Spit it out Lenny, whatever it is?” It was grinding her nerves together as he stood there shifting from one foot to the other like he had to go to the bathroom.

“Yes ma’am, I came right over to get you.” Tears filled his eyes, and he tried battling them back by taking a deep breath. “It happened so quickly. I don’t know what started it. You have to come quick to the yearling barn, Miss Mathews.”

Lena jumped up from the chair and raced around her desk. The ringing phone went unnoticed as she race out of the office. “Okay Lenny calm down and tell me what happen?” Taking the little man by his upper arm, she took off running to the golf cart that was used to get around on the farm, nearly dragging him behind her. Lena’s stomach was starting to churn again, her mind racing. “Spill it Lenny, NOW!” Lena snapped as she stomped on the peddle.

“Two of the yearlings they... They”

Her eyes scanning the paddocks as they headed toward the yearling barn, locking on to the crowd in the middle of a paddock

closest to the barn. Coming around the corner of the paddock, Lena heard a low gut wrenching sound come from somewhere in the middle of the people working at what, she couldn't see. Braking hard at the gate Lena jumped from the cart as Lenny's hand got a firm grasp on her upper arm and stopped her. Panic like she'd had never known before, had her heart nearly jumping out of her chest. "Let go of me." Lena growled, wrenching her arm away from him, running into the paddock she could see the two horses. Lena skidded to a halt at the horror of what she was seeing, "Holy shit! What the hell is happening around here?" She exploded. Not expecting anyone to answer, she couldn't believe what she was seeing. The grooms worked quietly as they tried to sooth the two yearlings while another was giving each an injection to calm them, quietly Lena moved closer to help the grooms.

The scene was like something out of a horror movie. Oh God! Oh God! Her precious babies. The two yearlings, both impaled through the chest by steel rods. Her brain couldn't comprehend clearly, what she was seeing. Fifteen people, grooms, hot walkers, exercise riders and the vet tried to keep the yearlings from thrashing around and causing more internal damage. Time moved in slow motion it seemed, like wadding through thick syrup, as they waited for the drug to start working.

Her mind raced, trying to work out the possible ways of removing the steel rods. The vet standing on the other side of the little filly named High Class Gal was holding the end of his stethoscope to her side under the front leg. The filly, not wanting to give in to the drug set back on her haunches trying to free herself, her eyes wild with fear and pain rolling back in her head, rearing up and pulling the steel rod out of the ground. The filly sorted as she fell sideways.

Lena and the vet lunged at the same time toward her, holding her down on the ground. High Class finally giving in to the drug relaxed her body so the vet could safely check her and get a harness hooked up to load her onto the trailer.

Turning her attention to the other filly, still standing with help from the people standing around her, she sent two of the people off to get the two trailers need to transport the injured fillies. She knew Glamour Girl was having problems breathing. Hearing, the sound

of a car pulling up outside the paddock Lena didn't daring to take her attention off the filly.

The cart he used to get around the farm was nowhere in sight, sliding back into the Jag and slowly, making his way to the training barn. He rounded the bend on the other side of the yearling barn, as he was wondering where everyone was. Spotting the vet, at the other end of the yearling barn Gary punched the gas pedal and yelled out the window, "What happen?" Stopping on the other side of the gate, he jumped out of the car walking quick style toward the vet, "Holy Hell, What happen?"

The vet not taking his eyes or attention from the filly he was trying to secure in the harness so she could be loaded onto the trailer, nodded to the steel rod sticking out of the fillies chest. "Lena could use your help over there with the other filly." Giving a nod in the direction, where Gary was needed.

He blanked his mind to any thoughts accept for the attention the horses needed, pivoting quickly on the toe of his boot, making his way toward Lena, to help with the other filly. "Move your foot over some so I can dig up the bottom of the steel rod." Gary said quietly, as he moved slowly around the others doing their best to hold Glamour Girl up in place, "is she drugged?"

"Yes, so far it's working we'll hold her the best we can unless she decides otherwise."

Knowing he was putting himself in the direct line of fire, should the filly come too, rear and paw the air. The lethal hooves of the filly in full-blown panic could bash in his head. Slowly crouching down, he noticed the fillies eyes were half closed and glazed. Her breathing sounded worse than an asthma patient in a full-blown asthma attack does. Placing his hands around the base of the steel rod, he dug at the soil and grass around it. "How far in the ground was the other steel rod?"

"I don't know, two maybe three feet."

"One of you, bring me a shovel or something to dig with, move it." The tone of command in a harsh whisper had Lenny sprinting for the barn. "What happen, Lena?"

"I don't know Lenny tried to tell me when he came to the office to get me. He was shook up pretty bad; we came back here in the cart. It's only been maybe ten, fifteen minutes."

Lenny returned passed over the shovel and stepped back out of the way. "Lenny, move over to the other side of the filly and help hold her. Move slow Lenny, any quick movements could make her panic even though she's drugged." Gary kept his voice soft but firm while giving his command.

"Yes, sir" Lenny said.

Standing to dig with the shovel, keeping his movements slow and easy as the earth gave way to the shovel quicker than his fingers that were now caked with the rich dark soil and blood. Making sure to dig on one side of the steel rod, "I'm at the end of it on this side, and starting on the other side. Hold her up and steady. I'm going to dig a trench line out from the other side, so when we lay her over the rod will be free."

Everyone nodded in agreement. The ground giving very quickly now, they were almost there, Gary thought to himself. The filly standing with help was bleeding profusely around the rod. Tossing the shovel in the opposite direction of the path, they would need to take. He looked up to see the vet backing a trailer closer to them with a harness hanging in the center the trailer that looked like a shorter version of a semi trailer. Backing up as close as he dared, leaving the diesel engine running. The harness, he pulled out was attached to a cable and pulley system. Gary took the harness and walking back toward the filly slowly, while the vet let out the cable. Hooking the harness around the filly, "Three of you men come around to this side; we're going to lay her over this way keeping the rod in line with the trench." Waiting for the men to get into position hoping his plan worked, without any more damage to the filly.

"After you lay her over, I'll back the trailer up the rest of the way."

Giving the vet a nod that he'd had heard him. "Slow and easy." Lena holding the fillies head trying to keep it in the same position as she walked forward, they laid Glamour Girl on her side. By some small miracle, the filly didn't move a muscle. Praying that wasn't a bad sign about the condition the filly was in. She had already lost a fair amount of blood. Gary motioned, to the vet as he backed the trailer another four feet, giving him the stop signal.

The vet climbed back inside the trailer to take up the slack in the cable. "As the cable tightens and lifts her, turn her and walk in

with her, holding her in the same position. All of you will have to ride in the trailer with the filly, keeping her in that same position as when you entered the trailer." Looking over at Lena, the woman was soaked with blood. He had a new level of respect for her. She was some kinda tuff.

The equine hospital was twenty frustrating minutes away, without having to drive at a snail's pace. Sitting in the waiting area, her whole body covered in blood from both of the fillies. Lena didn't give a damn about her appearance; her brain was still trying to work out what had happened, but still unable to work around the horror of it all. Leaning forward with her elbows braced on her knees, her bloody hands dangled between them, as she stared at the clean floor tiles between her muck boots.

Most people thought of the racehorses as an investment of time and money or a possession. To Lena they were so much more. She knew Glamour Girl's chance of surviving this was slim to none. Hearing the footsteps of boots coming toward her, Lena didn't really care who it was since it was too soon for the equine surgeon to be through with both fillies.

Stopping in the middle of the doorway to the waiting room, what Gary saw was heart breaking even for a man like him. He had come to take her home so she could clean up. He cared way too much for the woman. Moving quietly to sit in the chair next to her, "Let me take you home Lena, there's nothing more you can do right now. The surgeon is going to be awhile fixing the damage." Leaning forward, lifting her chin with his finger so he could look her in the eyes. Hoping she wasn't going into shock. Her face, very pale beneath the streaks of dirt and blood, was blank of any emotion no tears of devastation and heart break, nothing.

Gary scooped her up out of the chair cradling her against him, and walked out of the equine hospital. Gently sitting her in the front seat of the Jag he buckled her seat belt. Lena didn't move or say anything, staring blindly straight ahead through the windshield as he slid into the driver's seat, starting up the Jag and pulled out on to the main road heading back to the farm.

She didn't say a word or make a sound, so he didn't push her. Parking, as close to the back door as possible, going around to the passenger side, he unbuckled the seatbelt, and lifting her up out of

the seat Gary headed for the back door to the house. "No, don't go in there. Not with me covered in blood. Mom will freak out and so will the other women in there. Take me to the office and I'll clean up there." Her voice was barely a whisper. Having stopped on the sidewalk at the bottom of the steps he turned, to head for the office inside the main barn, continuing through the office door and straight into the bathroom. She had started to shake as he sat her on the toilet and bent down to take the muck boots off her feet.

"I can take it from here Gary." Lena said through chattering teeth, her whole body was caught up in the waves of hard bone rattling shivers, God she was cold clear down to the bone.

"I'm sure you can, but you're going to get some help any way." He knew the signs of shock, when it was staring him in the face.

Frowning at the top of Gary's head was the only thing she could manage. Her arms and legs felt like they were weighted down with lead, shaking on their own. "What if I don't want it? Your help, I mean."

"We could argue about it, wouldn't do any good cause I'll win, and you're not up to an argument right this second." Still on bended knee, Gary looked up into those green eyes, slightly less glazed looking, and that gave him some relief.

"You're not taking a shower with me, Gary."

"Yes I am, I'm going to clean you up and then you're going into the house and straight to bed before you fall on that pretty face of yours." Knowing he would regret this for some unforeseen time to come. After pulling her socks off and tossing them aside, he took her by the hands and pulled her up, as he stood to finish undressing her.

"We should leave our clothes on then." *Was that her voice?* The husky tone sounded foreign to her.

"You can't, those clothes are ruined. They have to come off, Lena. Raise your arms," pulling the hem of her t-shirt out of her jeans and over her head. The woman was slender as a wish. The passion pooling in his groin made his throat tighten as he reached for the top button on her jeans, undoing it. Now wasn't the time for thoughts of making love to her.

"Are you taking your clothes off too?" Her mind was so fuzzy; she didn't dare take her eyes off his. What Lena saw in the deep slate gray of his eyes, made her body tingle all over. Hoping her

unruly body wouldn't betray her again, wouldn't that just cap the whole horrible day off, she thought disgusted with life in general.

"No, I'm keeping my clothes on." Those stormy gray pools locked on to her with a question in them. She was too soft right now, fragile like the legs of the thoroughbreds grazing in the paddocks outside. Trying to think of other things besides her body, *Okay, Gary quick style now get her in and get her out before you lose the rest of your manners.*

Expelling the breath, she had been holding, waiting for his answer. "Why are you doing this, Gary?"

Without giving her an answer, he moved her none to gently into the shower. The water he'd already turned on was warm. Still fully clothed, turning her to face him, and leaning her head back to wet her hair, he dumped shampoo on top of her head, put extra in the palm of his big work roughen hands. Working the shampoo into the long length of her hair the white lather turned to a pink tint from the blood that had started to dry. Leaning her head back again, her body pressing against his, hips to hips. Suddenly he felt dizzy, looking down into the green eyes that stared up at him with absolute trust. Grinding, his back teeth, as a low growl escaped from his lips "You're killing me slowly woman. Very slowly, just so you know."

The new knowledge that she affected him had the corners of her mouth bowing upward, in a smile. Her lips parted to say something, and his fingertips softly pinched them closed again. Gary was shaking his head, "Don't say anything, your done with your shower." Turning her away from him, Gary pushed her out of the shower stall, and whipped the curtain closed again, completely cutting her off from his eyesight.

With the flick of a wrist he shut the hot water off, planning on drowning himself under the harsh cold spray. He stripped his clothes off and dropped them unceremoniously on the floor at the back of the shower stall with a soggy splat. Soaping and scrubbing the bloody grim away as quickly as he could.

She had been floating along with the warmth of passion coursing through her veins, having delicious thoughts about stripping him down to the skin just as he had stripped her. Snatching a towel from the cabinet she rubbed her arms dry, before leaning over to wrap the towel around her dripping hair and angrily snatching

another towel, from the cabinet, to finish drying off with. Propping her left foot on the toilet, she bent to dry her leg and heard the water shut off. Continuing with her task, her mind wasn't fuzzy now, no surrey Bob it was not. Finished with the left leg, she switched to the right. This was the first time she had ever been this intimate with a man. Oh, she'd had sex before, if you wanted to call high school kids getting it on, sex. Gary had started this at the diner with his soul stealing stare, reaching into deepest parts of her. Read her every thought, feel and know her every emotion. Taking her time, he had to come out sooner or later, naked as the day he was born or fully clothed, didn't make a damn to her. He would pay for working her up into a heated state again then rudely shoving her into a different state of mind whether she wanted it or not.

Shivering, his teeth on the verge of chattering, damn woman. "I know your still out there, would you mind handing me a towel, please?" Holding his hands in front of his most vulnerable parts, as he waited for her to answer, "Lena, don't make me come out there. I mean it."

A feeling of complete smugness swept through her body as she tried to work the kinks out of her muscles, stretching her arms high over her head, arching back and to the sides. Eyeing the cabinet that held the towels, smirking to herself as she turned to face the shower with the curtain still closed. Knowing what she looked like with her fiery red hair down starting to wave madly clear down to her waist and not a stitch of clothing on.

Lena took a hold of the shower curtain, and giving it a solid yank sent it crashing to the other end of the curtain rod. Placing the palms of her hands on the counter she was now leaning back against, her right leg slightly bent at the knee. *There is a God!* Lena thought, for the master had out done himself when he made Gary Wellington.

He was standing there shivering and covering himself, thick silky black hair with just a hint of a wave, smoldering stormy slate gray eyes reminding her of a hurricane blowing onto shore. Wide shoulders, well defined chest with corded muscles and abs, *mmm...mm*. Still, taking in the site before her eyes, no man had tempted her since high school. Gary was truly sinful to look at. Reaching back for a towel and holding it by the corner letting it

unfold and dangle from her fingertips. "You'll have to come and get it, if you want it?" Her eyes, lit with passion, the green dancing like live flames.

The spit had dried up in his mouth as soon as he had seen her beautiful body. Like sculpted alabaster, no tan lines marking her skin, silken hair, some draped over both shoulders lightly covering her breasts, her nipples were hardening under his gaze. Yes, slender as a wish only now he could look at what he had missed while trying to hurry. The toned curves of her hips, thighs and calves, the legs alone sent an electrical punch straight to his groin.

No longer shivering for the sight of Lena made his body heat spike to a near feverish pitch, his gaze raking back up her body, slowly, savoring every precious inch of skin. Stopping at her breasts still peeking out from behind her hair, hardening more at his gaze, and seeing her respond to his gaze had his libido swinging from the rafters of the barn. Heart beat quickening, all this and he hadn't truly touched her skin yet.

Clearing his dry throat not sure, if he could talk without begging, "I won't stop for the towel Lena, if I step out of the shower now with you standing there naked. Your what I want, not the towel. Are you ready for that? It's your choice, stay or go." Gary's voice had grown raspy with desire and the lack of moisture.

Dropping the towel on the toilet lid as she said, "Go!" Moving to the door and opening it, as she cast one last glance over her shoulder, before closing it behind her. The office door, closed thankfully. Pulling on the spare set of clothes she kept in the bottom of the filing cabinet, it took everything in her not to blaze a path back to the house and lock herself in her room. Dropping into the chair behind her desk, scrubbing her face with both hands "*What the hell is the matter with me, teasing the man like that?* It would server me right, if he had taken me up on my pose, like an offering to a starving wolf." The look that had been in his eyes was pure barely leashed male hunger. Making her tingle all over, as his gaze raked slowly over her whole body. Flinching at the sound of the bathroom door opening, Lena looked up to see if he was mad.

Gary knew she was still in the office, since he could hear her muttering to herself. Unable to make out the words, but he understood the meaning. The look in her eyes before she fled had made him wish he could take his words back. She had been scared,

flat out frightened. Opening the door to lean in the doorway, not wanting to make her feel cornered. Rubbing his damp hair with the towel, he wondered if something bad happened in her past, to make her afraid of sexual intimacy.

She couldn't read his facial expression. However, he seemed relaxed now. Instead of the hungry predator, he had been standing in the shower. "I'll apologize for teasing you in the bathroom. I'm not really like that and I can't stand women who treat men that way." Apologies never came easy for Lena; it felt as though the words wanted to stick in her throat.

Standing on the other side of the desk, placing both hands on the papers stacked neatly, he leaned in so he could smell her. Looking into her eyes, making sure not to miss her reaction this time, "There is no reason to apologize, Lena, but you can tell me what happen to you to put that scared look on your face so quickly. Did someone hurt you?" The thought of some other man putting his hands on Lena in any way, filled him with a blooming anger that would know no boundaries.

Shaking her head, "It's nothing like that, Gary." She could feel the heat climbing her neck and sting her cheeks. A blush is the red heads curse. Seeing the anger in his eyes sent a cold chill racing down her spine. Shaking her head again, as she pondered his anger, "I promise it's nothing like that." She could feel herself being pulled into those stormy gray eyes. Lena's heart beat thudded, with a yearning to let go and follow. To wrap her in a cocoon, a safe haven, away from the madness her life had become in the last twenty-four hours. The thought of Mrs. Cragg was like a splash of cold water to the face. Breaking eye contact, "I need to go up to the house and check on my mother."

"What's wrong with your mother, is she sick?" The concern in his voice was thick.

"No, a friend of ours was murdered; mom heard it on the news this morning."

"Do they know what happen to the woman? How she was murdered, I mean?" The news of her mother's friend being murdered after his meeting with Captain Norman about the East Coast Lover worried him.

"She didn't know this morning when I left the house to come out here to the office. I stayed with her until the other ladies in the

group arrived, so she may know more about what happen now." When the phone rang, it startled her. Picking it up on the second ring, "Mathews Farm, Lena speaking, may I help you?" Watching Gary set himself in the chair on the other side of her desk.

"It's me Jessica, called to let you know I'm on my way. Do you want me to pick up anything?"

She had been thinking it might be the surgeon with news about the two fillies. Sighing, "No just bring Lela and yourself. There's been a lot going on here today, I'll tell you about it when you get here." Checking her watch and realizing it was three thirty already. "I'm heading up to the house now. Meet you there."

"Okay, see you in a few."

Ending the call, and sitting the cordless phone back in its charger. "You might as well come up to the house to; mom can use all the distraction and support she can get." Taking the files she had been working on earlier that morning, she put them back in the filing cabinet and motioning Gary out of the office so she could lock the door. Walking side by side out of the barn entrance Lena stopped abruptly, both hands flying to her chest where her heart was trying to pound its way out, at the sound of a branch breaking somewhere in the woods on the west side of the farm. A deep seated instinct had her shifting to stand in front of him. Guard well those you love.

Gary heard it to, the snap stopping him in his tracks. Could be an old dead branch breaking off in the breeze, finally giving way, except there wasn't a breeze to speak of, he glanced at Lena now standing in front of him and seeing Lena shiver, he stepped to the side. She had a strange look in her eyes. "What is it?" Gary snapped as he searched the tree line.

The same feeling she had the night she went to Jessica's for pizza and beer, was back full force. Really creepy, someone was hiding in the dense wooded area staring at her, watching her every move. "I don't know if this is going to sound weird, but I can feel someone staring at me and it's really creepy because this is the second time I've had this feeling." She decided to play it off as a stressful day as Gary put a friendly arm around her shoulder, drawing her closer to his side.

Eyes narrowing at the wooded area, Gary watched to see if anything moved in the shadows of the thick vegetation. He wasn't

a believer in paranormal activity, like things that go bump in the night, but he did understand gut instinct. And his was screaming the same thing Lena's was. "Come on let's get you in the house," starting up the sidewalk again. "What's your mom cooking for dinner?" Looking down at Lena with a smile just beginning to play at the corner of his lips. "You going to invite me to stay, or am I going to make soulful eyes at your mother so she'll feel sorry for me and insist I do?"

Lena had a sneaky suspicion her mom was trying her hand at match making. Even though she felt there might be something growing between her and Gary, she didn't like the idea, of people meddling with the outcome of her life. "Why do you want to stay for dinner?"

"Let's see, I'm a grown man who loves home cooked food, then there's being surrounded by a house full of beautiful women while eating that great food that's cooked by an awesome woman. By the way, she has already stolen my heart. You may have to fight her for my affection."

Knowing she would have to do no such thing, but deciding to play along anyway. Lena walked through the doorway and into the kitchen with Gary's arm still around her shoulders; she really liked him as a person. Though, she still wasn't comfortable with the thought of being more than friends, because it would mean emotional attachment. Something she would have to think about quickly before the relationship went any further beyond business. There, Lena was certain a physical relationship with Gary would be more than just that. Slipping out from under his arm, "Have a seat." She said waving a hand toward the table, "I'll make us a drink and we'll join the crowd in the living room."

"So I can stay for dinner?" Gary said as he pulled a chair out, turning it so he could sit and watch her move around the kitchen. He hadn't moved his things from the hotel into the apartment yet. He had planned to do that later today; staying at the hotel served an important purpose for his reason of being in Daytona to begin with. The Mathews farm was quickly becoming home to him. Something he hadn't been aware of missing since his mother had been murdered two years ago. Gary had firsthand experience that life was too short to waste one precious moment of it.

The sound of a dog barking jarred him out of his thoughts just before the door to the mudroom swung open, and a big tri colored dog headed straight toward him.

"Lela, no jumping!" Jessica said, coming through the doorway behind the big St. Bernard. "Mind your manners now and say hello to Mr. Wellington." Skidding to a halt at the command, her butt dropped to the floor, to sit in front of the new person. Lela's big tongue was hanging out of the side of her mouth as she raised her big paw to shake.

Taking the big paw, and shaking it Gary laughed at the dog's antics, "Aren't you gorgeous." He loved animals, especially dogs and horses. Just as he was about to let go of the big paw her tongue lapped at his cheek, giving him a big slobbery kiss. "Thanks, big girl."

Laughing at the look on Gary's face, Lena handed him a paper towel to wipe his cheek off. "There you've made a new friend."

Going to the sink, to wash the dog slobber off his face, Gary glance over intending to say hello to Jessica and noticed the mischievous gleam in her blue eyes. Wiggling his eyebrows at her, he grabbed Lena around the waist, yanked her body up against his and kissed her surprised mouth as if his life depended on it. His tongue darting in and caressed hers, making her purr.

So this is how the wind blows; it's about damn time too, Jessica thought and leaned back against the counter, a little spurt of envy settling around her heart. Jessica heard Anna coming, and started clearing her throat loudly trying to get the two lovebirds attention. *Oops, too late*

"Lena is that you?" Anna said as she walked into the kitchen, sticking to her mission of getting more drinks, averting her eyes so no one would see the hopeful expression that she carried around, Lena falling in love with Gary. After all the bad news, this would lighten Anna's heart a great deal.

Jumping back like a guilty child caught raiding the cookie jar at midnight. Lena glared at Jess for not helping the situation and stomped on the toe of Gary's boot, as she move out of arms reach, to make Jess a glass of ice tea. Hoping her heart would stop thumping hard against her breastbone. The man had kissed the breath right out of her.

Anna hugged Jessica, and kissed her on the cheek before turning her loose. "I'm so happy to see you honey. Your staying for dinner both of you, I won't take no for an answer." Sliding her arm through Jessica's, and then turning she slid her other arm through Gary's leading them both out of the kitchen. "Bring the tea with you Lena honey, please."

Lena couldn't believe what she'd just saw, as the trio rounded the corner out of eye sight, she could hear her mother telling Gary he was to stay for dinner, she insisted and wasn't taking no for an answer, as she led Jessica and Gary, her soon to be lover, to the living room, "Oh god!" When had she decided that, pressing a hand to her stomach that had tightened into a big knot of hot anxiety? Picking up the tea pitcher, and heading for the living room, she heard her mom laughing at something Gary had said. To hell with it, come what may. Right now mom was laughing and that is all that mattered, her happiness.

CHAPTER FIVE

Standing at the window in her office looking out at the paddocks watching the horses graze. She had just gotten off the phone with the vet who was overseeing the recovery of High Class Gal and Glamour Girl. The healing process was coming along better than the vet had thought, even though they both still ran the risk of infection setting in the wounds. They were both still alive. That in its self was a big miracle.

Then there was Gary, since he had stayed that night for dinner a couple of weeks ago, he had taken her out to dinner and to a couple of movies. Lena had fallen in love with him that night at dinner, watching him with her mother. Making her and the other women at the table laugh after the horrible day they had all had.

Last night he had taken them both to the movies, to see Sandra Bullock in Two Week Notice. Most men didn't go for chic flicks. He was living in the apartment above her office in the main barn now. She had been tempted to go up and see how he lived several times, but the thought of being alone in his apartment with him made her nervous. Everything about Gary interested her. Shaking herself out of her mental carnival, she sat back down at the desk hoping to get some more work done, just as the phone started ringing again.

Holding the phone between her ear and shoulder as she turned back to the computer, it chimed, like a doorbell, indicating that she had received a new e-mail.

"Hey, just called to see if you've heard from the vet's office yet?"

Leaning back in the chair to chat with Jessica, "Yes, just a few minutes ago, they're both healing slowly the vet said it would be at least three more weeks before I could bring them home." Wondering who had sent her an e-mail, Lena clicked on the inbox icon. "What the hell is this?" Unaware she had yelled into the phone.

“What?”

“This e-mail, the subject line says Die Bitch.”

“Don’t touch it I’m on my way, show it to Gary, Lena.” Jessica demanded.

Still sitting in the chair, Lena stared at the computer screen. She had yanked her hand back from the mouse. Questions circled her mind like vultures. *Who is doing this to me?*

The prank calls had started a couple weeks ago, she figured it was just some kids playing pranks. There was no noise in the background, no talking, only silence. Now Lena was wondering if it could be the same person that had sent her the first e-mail yesterday.

The night her two fillies had been hurt she had gotten the first prank call at two o’clock in the morning. Prank calls late at night and now a second e-mail, *are they from the same person?*

Wondering she reached for the mouse, her hand was shaking.

“Lena, did you hear me? Don’t touch it, I’m on my way.” Jessica yelled again, to get Lena’s attention when she didn’t answer.

Hearing the worry in Jessica’s loud voice snapped her back to the present. “Yes. Okay, I’ll wait for you to get here.”

“Promise me you won’t open it, where is Gary?”

“I don’t know, the stables maybe, why?” Lena knew she didn’t need a keeper damn it, everyone was trying to play Cupid while her life was going to hell in a hand basket.

“Show it to Gary.” Jessica snapped back. Over the last two weeks, Jess had seen the low-grade panic and fear in Lena’s eyes every time she asked, what was wrong, and Lena wouldn’t answer. Jess knew something was going on. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“Fine I’ll see you in a few.” Ending the call and dropping the phone in her lap. Leaning back in the chair thinking to her-self, she had to get a hold on her emotions, tapping her fingers on the arm of the chair, she wasn’t one to panic and that was just what she’d been doing for the last two weeks. Somebody was playing mind games, calling her in the middle of the night.

Snorting to herself and now two e-mails, she should be good and pissed off, and riding on the tail end of that thought was the anger starting to build. Standing up to pace behind the desk, fisting her hands at her side, yeah this is much better. Better to be mad,

whoever was doing this to her would pay. The prank calls and the first e-mail had to be connected. Was the person, one of her employees? No, it couldn’t be, she had worked with these employees, side by side for years. Still pacing and mumbling to herself. Lena stopped in front of the window; she didn’t see the new foals sunning themselves, so lost in her own thoughts. It had to be the same person, going back her computer with the intention of opening the second e-mail. At the corner of her desk, Lena froze; she could hear footsteps pounding on the stairs. *Someone’s coming.* Panic seized her body making her heart race and pound hard in her chest.

Gary was heading up the stairs when he heard Lena yell, “What the hell is this.” A feeling of unease settling in the pit of his stomach not knowing what was going on, taking the rest of the stairs three at a time. He walked quickly toward the office as he heard someone skidding to a halt outside in the driveway then the car door slamming. Reaching the office doorway to see Lena, eyes big and panicked, then drop, like a stone in the chair at her desk, both of her hands gripping the arms of the chair. He could hear her fighting to catch her breath, steady it as she closed her eyes and fought for a deep breath.

Moving round the desk beside her, and squatting down so he was eye level with her, she had a death grip on the arm of the chair. Laying one hand on the top of hers and lightly brushing the hair back from her face with the other. “Lena, open your eyes and look at me, honey. Tell me what’s put that look in your eyes.” Gary was slowly, and very gently, prying her fingers off the arm of the chair. Leaning in to press light kisses to the corners of her lips.

He had never kissed her like this before. Soft light kisses on the corner of her lips, on her closed eyelids, his lips brushing lightly against her temple.

Lena could feel the panic easing, giving way to a fire slowly building. Each time his lips brushed lightly next to hers only to retreat, leaving her with a sense of building frustration. He was holding her hand now drawing lazy circles on her palm with his thumb. Feeling his breath on her lips, Lena wondered if finally she would have his mouth on hers. Slowly opening her eyes, to see the smoky gray of his had darkened, turning stormy.

Sliding her other hand lightly along his jaw, running her fingers up around his neck and into his thick silky hair as her lips parted in anticipation. She could see the storm in his eyes building, fisting her hand in his hair taking a firm hold and pulling him to her. Let the storm rage. His scent had wrapped its self around her, cocooning them from the rest of the world, and why should she care she had his lips on hers finally. Lena wanted him, all of him, on her, in her gloriously naked, sliding over and on her skin.

Dimly Gary registered the kitchen door slamming shut. Then Lena moaned into his mouth as their tongues mated and he sank deeper into her, scooping her up out of the chair she wrapped her legs around his waist. Bracing her against the wall behind the chair, she was grinding herself against him, now, it had to be now or he would die. So lost in his need for her, nothing else existed, time had stopped. Gripping the tail of her shirt with both hands, two seconds, he would have her gloriously naked. Stripped bare and then she would be his, all of her, he had to have all of her now, yanking her shirt up.

God yes finally. Hurry please hurry. Lena felt like screaming it, maybe she did, she wasn't sure. She thought she heard someone say her name, like a faint whisper. God her body was on fire, breasts painfully tight, and nipples hard as pebbles. Pressing herself against his chest rubbing, to ease the ach in her breasts, whimpering part pain and part in frustration.

Jessica slammed the kitchen door closed, moving quickly through the house and up the stairs calling Lena's name as she went. Hearing the heavy breathing and the rustle of clothes, *did someone just moan?* Stopping just inside the doorway of the office, Jessica cleared her throat loudly. She had told Lena to show it to Gary. Maybe Lena miss understood that she'd meant the e-mail, Jessica mused to herself. The sight of them groping each other was, *oh no! No, no, no.* He was going to rip her shirt off of her. Stepping farther in to the office taking hold of the doorknob and giving it a hard shove so it slam shut.

Bam... Slamming shut hard enough not only to rattle the pictures on the wall next to it, but making Gary jump back away from Lena leaving her to slowly slide to the floor, keeping a straight face the best she could. "Now that I have your attention and I don't feel like

a peeping Tina." It took everything Jess had to keep from laughing. Lena was still sitting on the floor, eyes closed, breath ragged and lips swollen from being so, thoroughly kissed. Gary on the other hand looked ready to kill someone, like maybe her since she was the one to interrupt. Jessica didn't blame him, envied him and Lena yes. Envied them both for what she could see, was growing between them. To have a man so totally focused on you nothing else in the world seem to matter, total absorption excluding all else.

Good god, he had nearly taken her right there up against the wall with the door wide open for anyone to walk in on them. He shot another glare at Jessica before turning to help Lena to her feet. Looking down at her he noticed her shirt was hiked up around her chest barely covering her breasts. Lips swollen, her breath heaving as if she had just ran five miles uphill.

Gary hoped she was in as much pain as he was. Extending his hands down he took both of hers to pull her up. God she was limp as an over cooked noodle. *Mmm.* "Go far away Jess, far, far away!" He growled. Bending to rub his lips over Lena's, he stopped, just short of the mark when her eyes popped open.

"Maybe she should sit down; she doesn't look too steady yet?" Jess was trying not to smile, but one corner of her mouth twitched with the effort.

"Mmm... Maybe, but I like holding her. She's such a beautiful hand full, I'm thinking about keeping her." Lena's eyes were starting to clear, no longer heated with passion, cooling rapidly. Yes, he thought, he was going to keep her, she just needed to catch up so she was feeling the same as him.

"Quit talking about me like I'm not even here." *Low and husky,* was that her voice? She had never heard her voice sound like that. Then again, she'd never been devoured in her office up against the wall before either. "Why are you here Jess? What's..?"

Shoving her hands through her hair, trying to get her foggy brain to snap into focus, Oh "Oh, Oh my." Dropping into the chair, she leaned back and closed her eyes. "The second e-mail." Taking a deep breath, she ordered her system to settle down and focus.

"I take it you haven't opened it yet Gary?" Jess said, her amusement at the two lovebirds fading.

"What are you talking about Jessica, what second e-mail and why would I open it?" Neither of them was making sense to him. Then he remembered walking into the office seeing the terrified look on Lena's face. Looking at her with questioning eyes, she gave a slight nod toward computer screen. "Have you opened it yet?"

"No I started to, then Jessica said not to open it."

Taking the cell phone from the clip on his belt, flip it open and dialed Stevens number. After hearing several rings, and no answer, flipping the cell phone shut to disconnect the call, reattaching it to the clip on his belt. Looking over at Jessica, standing next to one of the big high back chairs on the other side of the desk, *well shit!* No wonder Stevens didn't answer his cell phone, he's sitting right outside the farm entrance. Pushing the power button on the monitor, Turning the power off so Lena wouldn't have to look at it not knowing what they would find when they open the e-mail.

Turning Lena's chair so she was facing him, "Don't open the e-mail I'm going to have someone check it and try to trace it back to the sender."

"It could be a prank; we don't even know what's in the e-mail." Lena had never been one to let people handle her problems. Her eyes locked onto the blank computer screen again. Could this e-mail be from the same person, who sent the one yesterday? She hadn't told anyone about the first e-mail she'd received. Just thinking about the picture she had seen after opening the attachment sent a cold shiver down her spine. Poor Mrs. Cragg, Lena knew now the older woman was a victim of the East Coast lover. "I received an e-mail yesterday that may be from the same sender."

Dropping her purse in the chair next to her, Jessica moved around the desk to stand on the other side of Lena's chair. "Is that why you shut down the computer so fast, yesterday when I walked into the office down at the barn?"

Rubbing her face with both hands as if she could scrub the horrible picture from her mind, she had seen after opening the attachment in the e-mail yesterday. "Yes, the picture was horrible; I didn't want anyone else to see it. In fact, I wish I hadn't seen it."

"I know this is going to be hard, but I want you to describe the picture to me." He hated to put her through this, knowing that it wasn't just a prank. Stevens had scouted the wooded area on the

south side of the farm looking for any signs of someone climbing over the fence to put the steel rods in the paddock where the two fillies were injured, and Stevens had found nothing which didn't surprise him one bit. Since then he had been running a series of background checks on all the Matthews employees. The process was slow going since he didn't have a lot of time to spare, solving part of the problem with him doing routine checks around the farm in the morning and evening. "If you don't want to describe it to me, I can open the e-mail, Lena."

Pushing her chair farther back from the desk and the computer, Lena waved a hand towards the computer. "Go ahead and have a look. I can't look at it again." Rising from the chair and walking back over to the window she had been looking out earlier, Lena wrapped her arms around her waist trying to blank the picture out of her mind.

Still standing in the same spot, not knowing what to say, Jessica wanted to see what the picture was. She had known something was wrong. When she had walked into the office, Lena's face was very pale. She had asked Lena what was wrong, and Lena just shook her head and said nothing was wrong. She was just tired. "Mr. Wellington, are you really going to look at the picture?"

"Make it Gary and yes, I'm going to look at the picture. You can stand over there with Lena, if you don't want to see it. This won't take me but just second to open the attachment and look at the picture." Watching Jessica's face Gary could see she was trying to decide if she really wanted to see the picture not.

"No. I want to see the picture."

Turning to the monitor, he had already turned back on, double-clicking on the e-mail to open it. Catching just a glimpse of the picture, Gary already knew it had to be from the East Coast lover. Hearing Jessica gasped in shock; he quickly closed the e-mail taking Jessica by the forearm and lowering her into the chair, shoving her head between her knees. "Take it easy now a deep breath, that's it, keep breathing."

Hands grasping the chair on both sides of her legs, her head being held between her knees by Gary's big hand, "You can let go now I'm not going to pass out."

Lifting his hand from the back of Jessica's head, he searched her face to make sure. "Don't set up too fast, just take your time and make sure your steady first."

Setting up slowly leaning her head back against the chair and closing her eyes. "Poor Mrs. Cragg, Lena who could've taken a picture and then e-mailed it to you?" Jess looked at Gary with questioning eyes. All the local news stations had been doing a large coverage on the East Coast lover's victims since the last two had been found in Daytona, standing up slowly, going over to Lena, Jess put a comforting arm around her shoulders. "I'm so sorry you had to see that, maybe Gary should look at the other e-mail now?"

"Both of you can go downstairs and wait in the kitchen. There's no way to know what's in the e-mail until it's opened."

Turning to look at Gary, Lena dropped her hands to her side; she was not some weak little girl, who was going to be run out of her office because some creep was sending horrible e-mails. "I am staying right here. No one is going to run me off." Turning back to look out the window again, so she wouldn't have to see what the second e-mail contained.

"Might as well open it because, I'm also staying put." The look on Gary's face was a sure sign of frustration, Jessica shook her head at him; she knew he was fixing to argue about her and Lena staying in the office while he opened the e-mail. "Save your breath, it won't do you any good to argue, we'll stay over here out of the way until you get done."

Great, this is just what he needed two stubborn women; it was bad enough when he only had Lena to deal with. Now, he had two on his hands, resigning him-self, to the fact that they were not going to leave. Trying to mentally, prepare his self for what might be in the second e-mail, double-clicking on the second e-mail. Gary's fingers tightening on the mouse as he watched the picture download, he could see the tips of the ears of one of the fillies that were injured. Eyes narrowing, taking in the angle of the photograph, whoever took the picture had a high-powered lens. Closing the e-mail, so he could have Stevens trace the sender. Setting himself down in Lena's chair, he wasn't leaving until he could have Stevens traced both e-mails.

"I can tell by the look on your face I'm glad we didn't see the picture in the second e-mail, it must have been worse than the first one." Lena walked over to her desk taking a cigarette out of the pack she had left laying there, and returned to the window to open it after lighting the cigarette, taking a quick drag of the cigarette blowing the smoke out the window. Normally she didn't smoke in the house, but right this second, she wasn't thinking too clearly. Who the hell, would be doing this to her? She didn't have any enemies that she knew of, with the exception of Bradley Jacobs, could he possibly do something like this and if so where would he get the picture of Mrs. Cragg after she was murdered? She had so many questions racing through her mind and no answers to go with questions.

"I'll have a friend of mine trace the e-mails, but I think you should go to the police with this before anything else happens."

"He's right Lena you should take this to the police and let them handle it."

Lena had been thinking about it since yesterday after she had seen the picture in the e-mail, but could the police do anything? *Another unanswered question, to go along with so many others.* "Ask your friend if he can trace the e-mails, and we'll talk about the police part later after we see if he can come up with anything." At the sudden ringing of the phone on her desk, scaring her and making her jump. Unsure as to whether she wanted to answer the phone, fearing it might be more bad news. Deciding to do it quickly, Lena picked up the phone, pressing the talk button and put the phone to her ear. "Matthews Farm Lena speaking, how may help you?" Frowning when no one said anything, she could vaguely hear a slight background noise, but was unable to make out what it was. Suddenly someone was snickering on the other end.

The faint raspy voice asking her, "Did you enjoy the present I sent you? They're a work of art, wouldn't you say?"

"Who the hell is this? Answer me damn you, the only kind of sick fuck that would do this through e-mail and over the phone, is a coward and an idiot, you bastard!" Breathing heavy as she clicked the end button, wishing that she had a regular telephone so she could slam the receiver down when she hung up on the bastard. Her body was shaking with anger. Pinching the bridge of her nose,

with her thumb and finger, trying to think calmly, "Okay, so maybe I could have handled that better." Lena said. Shrugging her shoulders rolling them back and forth, she felt too big for her own skin. And the bitchy nagging voice was getting louder.

"I think you handled it just fine. Who was it, did you recognize the voice? Maybe you can go downstairs and get us some coffee, and I will try to round up my friend, get him out here to trace the e-mails? Some of those chocolate chip cookies would be nice to." Not giving Lena time to answer any of his questions, it took all of his control to hold his raging emotions in check. Gary wanted to smash someone. Whoever was doing this to Lena would pay with their life, he would see to it.

"Come on Jess it'll give us something to do until his friend gets here." Lena didn't see the look of pure rage in Gary's eyes. Already headed down stairs to the kitchen, wishing the roller coaster she had been on for the last forty-eight hours would come to a stop so she could get off and stand on solid ground for a while.

Sitting back in the chair, he waited to hear them go down the stairs. He flipped open the cell phone again to call Stevens, holding the cell phone to his ear wondering where the hell, Stevens was.

"Stevens here what's up?"

"Are you close to the Matthews Farm?"

"Yeah I'm sitting down here at the end of the East property line, why what's up?"

"Can you say anything besides what's up? Never mind, I don't have time for this. I need you to come on up to the house at the Matthews Farm, you'll see where to park when you get up here, come to the side door." Gary knew he was about to blow their cover such as it was, but it didn't really seem to matter at the moment.

"Are you sure, Blondie is there, right? If I come up to the house, she will see me. How am I going to tail her if she knows what I look like and that I'm a friend of yours?"

"We'll work it out. Right now, we don't have much of a choice I need you here. Hurry up." Ending the call before Stevens could say more, as he made his way down stairs to catch Stevens outside before he formally met Lena and Jessica. He was going to have to give up either the truth about why they were here or come up with

another damn good lie, procrastination at its best. Gary decided to think about it later.

Waiting, for the coffee maker to finish she leaned against the kitchen counter watching Lena take a plate out of the cabinet to put cookies on. "You're in love with him, aren't you?" Even when something terrible was going on, it did not interfere with Jessica's romantic heart. Her romantic heart was the size of Texas, and her greatest downfall.

"Leave it to you to ask a question like that, at a time like this." Laughing, shaking her head. "No sense in lying about it. Yes, to answer your question even though I know it's written all over my face, every time I look at Gary."

Giving a little romantic sigh, Jessica thought it was about damn time. Lena had always kept men of every age at a far distance. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"Boy, we sure have gotten nosey here lately, haven't we?"

"Well, you can come to the house this evening for dinner, unless you have plans already?"

Knowing Jess wanted the juicy details, Lena sighed to herself, and she really wanted to talk to someone about this whole love thing. "All right, dinner at your place sounds good to me. Are you going to hang out here and see if Gary's friend can trace the e-mails?"

Jessica's lips pulled back in to a saucy little grin, running her tongue over her teeth while checking the manicure she'd, had done yesterday. "The Marlboro Man, isn't that what you and Jane had called him that night at the Rhinestone?"

Jessica had been wondering if Gary's friend was the same man that was following her around. She hadn't gotten a very good look at the man that night when he had placed himself between Bradley and her at the rhinestone club. Jessica had a suspicious feeling that it was, in fact the same man. Men can be so dense sometimes. They must have thought she wouldn't be able to spot someone following her in a midsize non-descript car that happen to show up every place she went.

She hadn't decided what she was going to do to the man following her, but he was fixing to learn a very important lesson. "Oh Yes, I'll be staying. I would really like to know who is

sending these e-mails to you. Do you think we should call the police now and turn this over to them?" Jessica asked as Lela began to bark, not bothering to get up, just letting them know someone had pulled into the parking lot. Taking Lela by the collar Jessica shushing her while holding her in place.

Gary walked into the kitchen and out the side door. Looking over at Lena with raised eyebrows as if to ask, *where is he going*. Releasing her hold on Lela, they both moved over to the kitchen window to see who Gary had gone outside to meet.

Waiting for Stevens, to walk over from his car, Gary rubbed at the back of his neck trying to ease some of the tension from feeling both women staring holes into his back. So she's in love with him, Gary couldn't stop the smile that spread across his face. Maybe Lena didn't need time to catch up with his feelings after all. "I need you to trace two e-mails back to the sender."

Seeing the smile spread across Gary's face made Stevens wonder what was going on here at the farm. Gary looked somewhat smug with that big sappy grin on his face. "Okay, what about the blonde I'm supposed to be tailing?"

"Instead of tailing her maybe you should just be her bodyguard." Shaking his head, he answered his own question. "No, I don't think Jessica would go for that either, we'll worry about it later. I'll fill you in after we get upstairs."

Ducking back away from the window when the two men turned, hoping her and Jessica hadn't been caught watching through the window. "Here they come, let's take this stuff upstairs to the office." Nearly forgetting to grab the plate of cookies on her way out of the kitchen, Lena reached over and as she was about to grab the plate on the counter, in walked Gary and the Marlboro Man into the kitchen.

Trying but failing to put cheery smile on her face. "Hello, you must be Gary's friend?" The hand that she had been reaching for the plate with, Lena aimed at the good-looking man to shake hands. Looking at Gary to see if he was going to introduce his friend to her, Lena raised one eyebrow to let him know, she wanted to be introduced to his friend whether he wanted to or not.

Leaning toward Lena nearly nose to nose, he took her out reached hand in his. He could feel her breath fluttering over his lips. "Lena this is Stevens, Stevens. This is Lena; can we get down to business now?"

Still looking into Gary's eyes she watched them heat with passion. Right this second Lena wished Stevens would vanish. Then she could wrap herself around Gary and forget about her problems. She knew now how she would feel being wrapped around him. Clearing her throat, "I would like to thank Stevens for helping Jessica out at the Rhinestone awhile back when Bradley, Jess's hopefully ex, showed up."

Stevens bent to show some attention to the big St. Bernard sitting in front of him, as she raised her paw, for an introduction she looked up at him with her big soulful eyes. Taking the big paw in his hand and giving it a shake while scratching the big dog behind her ear with his other hand. "You're welcome, anytime ma'am." He hadn't been able to take his eyes off the blonde since walking into the room. Standing up to face the woman, he had been tailing never breaking eye contact.

Watching the man called Stevens, Jessica was sure he was the same man she had seen turning up at odd moments wherever she happen to be. Tapping her fingernail on the carafe full of coffee, the sparks coming off Gary and Lena again would soon start burning anyone standing in the same room with them. Since the nail tapping was not working to get their attention Jessica cleared her throat loudly. "Lena."

Still holding Lena's hand, Gary leaned a little closer brushing his lips lightly over the corners of her mouth. The passion heating her eyes to a deeper darker green, he could feel himself sinking deeper into those green pools. Wrapping his other arm around Lena's waist, he drew her closer. His eyes heating more when her tongue snuck out to lick at the corners of her mouth to taste him, causing him to growl, voice growing huskier he pressed her firmly against his hard body. "The office is upstairs two doors down, go on up, we'll be there in a second."

Chuckling, to himself he walked out of the kitchen. "Man you have it bad Wellington, come on Blondie; you might as well come up and keep me company." Stevens invited as he snagged the plate of chocolate chip cookies, on his way out of the kitchen.

In her most prim voice, "I'll thank you not to call me Blondie, it's rude." The man was H.O.T. The nickname Jane had given him fit.

Stopping at the base of the stairs he gestured with his right hand for her to take the lead. "After you ma'am." he said and bowed lightly.

Rolling her eyes toward the ceiling she started up the stairs in front of Mr. Stevens. Why men thought, women could not see through their motives for wanting them to go first, she would never know? "Are you enjoying the view?"

Following the greatest pair of legs he had ever seen, he was sure, in his entire life, into the office. Noticing her toenails, painted a killer-kick-ass red, show cased in six-inch stilettos. He paused, just inside the office doorway, "Words do not describe my enjoyment of the view." Stevens voice was a low smoky growl, his eyes snapping up to hers, pinning her to the spot where she stood.

"It would take a long slow study with my fingers, lips and tongue to completely show how much I enjoy and appreciate the view." Hearing Gary and Lena making their way up the stairs, Stevens slowly walked past Jessica and tormented himself by taking a deep breath and let his arm brush against hers as he passed. Sitting down at the desk just that one inhale of her scent made him rock hard, the need to mate with her, so strong and completely primitive it shocked him to the core of his soul.

Jessica felt like a deer pinned in the headlights of an oncoming semi, not with the fear of being-smashed, but eaten alive. His eyes never wavered from hers as he walked past. His arm lightly brushing against hers nearly sent her into the stratosphere.

Her heart was pounding hard and fast as she turned to look out the window, pressing a hand to her stomach. My, God she felt like whimpering, no man had ever affected her like that, with just the barest of touch. Her whole body ached and tingled. *Okay Jess, get a grip.* Taking a couple of deep fortifying breath as Lena and Gary walked into the office.

"Have you been able to trace anything yet, Stevens?" Stopping in front of the desk with his arm around Lena's shoulders, she was doing her best to shake loose and gain her freedom. Gary had news for her, it wasn't going to happen. Rubbing, his hand up and down her left arm, the same way he would to calm a skittish filly.

The tension in the room was enough to choke on, Gary looked over at Jess standing with her back to everyone, and then back at Stevens.

He was hunched over the keyboard, lightly tapping the keys like a man possessed. "I'm working on it. Give me a second." Hell, he thought he had to be possessed. Just the slightest touch of her skin nearly set him off. "Okay baby, show me whatcha you got." The words he had just muttered to himself, echoed through his brain, chased by the vision of a Blonde goddess wearing nothing but mile high stilettos. As if that would ever happen, Stevens thought snorting to himself. He was six kinds of a fool for even thinking about her like that. She was the job and nothing else. His fingers moved rapidly over the keyboard with his eyes on the screen.

"Damn it, come on I know you're there." He mumbled, this guy was good, didn't want leave a trail did you buddy. His fingers suddenly stopped their rapid movement on the keys, to hover, waiting to issue more commands. Stevens leaned all the way back in the chair and flexed his fingers. "Why don't you and I go outside for a smoke, Gary?"

"We don't really have time for a smoke; I want to know who sent the e-mails." Gary was doing his best to keep Lena next to him so she couldn't see what was on the computer screen.

"We can talk about it while we smoke outside." After flicking a few keys, he shut the computer down so no one could see the screen. Stevens walked out of the office without saying another word, knowing Gary would be a long in a second.

Wondering what Stevens was up to Gary turned to follow his friend. "Don't touch the computer."

"Would you let me go, it's annoying and why can't we see what's on the computer?" Lena liked the way it made her feel, having his arm around her holding her close, but she wasn't going to tell him that.

"You could, accidentally, delete the information we need to track the sender." Gary said as he let go of Lena and walked out of the office to follow Stevens downstairs and outside.

Realizing Jessica hadn't said a word since her and Gary had entered the office, Lena walked over to stand next to her. "What's wrong Jessica?" She asked as she slipped her arm around Jessica's

waist, and laid her head on Jessica's shoulder, wanting to give comfort. Jessica wasn't an uptight person. You could almost feel the tension coming off her now in strong waves; she wondered what the cause was.

"Is it hot in here? *Mmm...* I feel like I'm having a power surge." Jessica felt flushed all over, hot and tingly. "So the men are outside discussing what the little women shouldn't hear, since when are they in charge. Come on let's go to break up their party."

"Sounds like a great idea. Did you see the way Gary was holding me in place, so I couldn't see the monitor?" Jess was right it was hot in here; she knew it wasn't the room temperature making her body heat up with anticipation. "I want you to stay here with me and mom. At least until we know something about the e-mails. Okay."

Slipping her arm around Lena's waist she gave her a little squeeze. "Sure, we can have dinner here, think we should invite the guys or not?" Jessica wouldn't mind having more time, to visually, examine the Marlboro Man; it would give her time to pick apart what she was feeling. Maybe she could touch him again and see if what she had felt the first time was an over active imagination.

"They'd just horn in on us anyway, might as well make it the four of us."

"Where's mom? I didn't see her car when I got here earlier."

"In town with the rest of the group, she said she won't be home till late." Lena said as they walked down the stairs together.

"It's good for her to get out of the house. Keep her mind off what's been going on lately."

Leaning on the porch rail looking out over the paddocks, Stevens took another drag from his cigarette as Gary came over to lean on the rail next to him. "I need more time to track the sender."

"What did you find that you didn't want Lena and Jessica to know about?"

"The way it looks now, both e-mails came from Blondie's computer."

"Bullshit, Jessica wouldn't do that. Jessica and Lena are like sisters."

"I know she didn't do it, whoever sent those e-mails had access to her computer or was able to link into her computer, that's why I need more time. I also need access to Blondie's computer. Then I can find out who used hers to send the e-mails." He took one last drag from his cigarette, before putting it out in the ashtray on the rail next to him.

"Well, at least we know they're not messing with the computer. What happened between you and Jessica after you two went upstairs to the office? And don't try to play it off, I know something happened." Turning so he could see Lena and Jessica as they come out the back door, Gary was wondering if Stevens charm had failed with Jessica. He looked at him with a questioning glare.

Man, as if he didn't have enough problems with Blondie and his lusty libido. One thing's for sure, he needed to stay far, far away from Blondie. His body would probably spontaneously combust the next time they touched. "Nothing happen, what's the plan now?"

Pushing open the screen door she heard Stevens ask his last question. "Now that's a damn good question and Jess and I both would like an answer?" Lena said, as she walked out onto the porch with Jessica, right behind her. And didn't they look comfy standing there next to each other protecting the little women; she thought and glared at Gary.

Looking at Lena, Jessica saw the angry look forming on her face. Oh, he is fixing to get it. Jess thought, here it comes.

Her blood was at a boiling point. No man should be able to empty the thoughts right out of a woman's head with a few kisses. It just wasn't right, and then his highhanded ways, holding her against him so she couldn't move away from his side. Infuriating, that's what it was; turning so she was face to face with the source of her irritation. "I want t..."

Grabbing both of Lena's arms, pulling her hard up against him before bending down, his mouth fastening to hers, tongues mating, while running his hands down her back bringing her closer. Molding her body to his so she could feel how hard she made him. His lips leaving a hot trail across her jaw, to the sensitive skin behind her ear, making her shiver. He tucked her head under his

chin, trying to remember they were not alone, yet. Both of them took a deep breath, and Gary ordered his raging system to level.

Stevens had never seen Gary act like this with any woman. "Get a room you two."

Okay, maybe another deep breath, focusing on anything when he had Lena in his arms was the biggest challenge he'd ever come across. "Jessica, Stevens needs access to your computer." Gary felt Lena shiver at the sound of his husky voice. Feeling a shiver of his own working through his, he hoped it wasn't visible to anyone else. At the same time not really, caring, if these two would get lost he could start at one end of Lena's body and work his way slowly, very slowly to the other end.

"No! Absolutely-not, why should I let him mess with my computer? Wait a second buster, here's an even more important question that needs to be answered." Stepping around Lena, so she could see the look on the Marlboro Man's face, she poked him in the chest with her finger, to get her point across. "Why have you been following me? That's the question I want answered first, before there is a plan and before we discuss it, someone will tell me why I've been followed everywhere for the last month." Now she had him, with Stevens and Gary standing here together, Jessica already knew they were working together, but would they admit it?

Stevens slapped Gary on the back with a smirk on his face saying, *let's see you smooth talk your way out of this one without giving up all the information*, Stevens thought. "How do you know it was Stevens following you?" Gary asked, raising both eyebrows in question.

Playing dumb with Blondie was a bad bet all around. Deciding to save his self, "Just because we happen to end up in some of the same places at the same time, doesn't mean I'm following you, this city isn't that big in the first place."

"So what would you call it, exactly, if not following, then maybe it's stalking?"

Straightening from the rail, he had been leaning on. Blondie had propped a hand on the curvy hip she had shot to the side when she'd asked her question making it a demanding challenge. Stevens body had instantly tensed ready to leap. His voice showing the strain of his control, "Watching out for you, that's what I call it."

Anger snapping in her eyes, god she felt powerful. They were not even close to eye level in height with each other. Jessica had never felt so alive around a man before. Want, oh yeah, she wanted him to kiss her, like Gary had kissed Lena. But she would never give into those wants that she knew for sure. "Who appointed you as my body guard?" She demanded, poking him in the chest again.

Laying a restraining hand on Stevens arm, obviously, there was more between these two than anyone else knew about. "Jessica, I asked him to follow you, and to keep any eye on you." Feeling Lena tense up after hearing what he had said. Gary tightened his hold on her, with his other arm so she couldn't move away from him. Before he had spoken, Lena had been leaning against him relaxed, with her arms around his waist.

"Why would you have him follow me, Gary?" She asked as she shot a hot glare at Gary.

"We were sitting at the table next to yours in the hotel dining room, when you had that little problem with your boyfriend. Seemed like the thing to do at the time." Gary shrugged. It wasn't really important to him. Lena had her hands on the rail now trying to push out of his hold.

CHAPTER SIX

The sudden ringing of the phone had all four of them turning at the same time looking at the back door leading in to the kitchen. "I need to answer that, Gary."

"We can finish this in the kitchen after Lena answers the phone." Gary turned her lose, watching her walk into the kitchen. He was two steps behind her going in the backdoor Stopping at the refrigerator, "Anyone, want a beer?" He asked, as Lena answered the phone. Ducking in the fridge to grab four beers and shutting the door with his hip.

"Speaking of the devil himself," Lena said, "I knew it was too damn good to be true, the thought of having one evening without you ruining it."

"Hello to you to Lena, is Jessica there?" Bradley said. "And may I speak to her?" *Why does she have to be over there?* He and Jessica got along so much better when she's not around to interfere with things. It was everything Bradley could do to contain the nasty little remarks that sprang to mind.

"Yes Bradley, she's here and no you're not talking to her, we're in the middle of something more important than you. And Jessica said she doesn't want to talk to you."

"This isn't funny Lena; put her on the phone, Now!" Bradley demanded.

"Oh, so you think you can talk to me the same way you've talk to Jessica and get what you want? You are so badly mistaken Bradley, in fact I can't wait until the day she gives you the boot. Wait, she has done that already hasn't she, twice now actually, since I was there both times. I'm going to give her the biggest celebration party this coming weekend a newly single woman could ever imagine. Since I have already made my feelings for you clear in the beginning of your relationship with Jessica, there's no

need for me tell you again what a low life scum bag you are. Now is there?"

The anger Lena felt for bastard Brad was swimming nicely through her veins, heating up to a nice boil, trying to hold the worse back was no easy task. Every time she talked to him, she had strong clear visions of her hands around his throat and squeezing until Bradley disappeared forever from Jessica's life. "Why don't you go find someone else to mentally abuse, Bradley?" Lena yelled into the phone.

Quickly losing control of the situation and his anger, "Lena you had better put Jessica on the phone or you'll be very sorry. I know you've been trying to split us up for months; I am tired of it, mind your own damn business or maybe you have no business to mind. What's a matter you can't get a boyfriend of your own? Yes! That has to be it." Laughing into the phone, Bradley's mind started to slip as the black fog seeped in, and he, losing all control. The darkness that taunted him at night with a seductive power he craved took over his mind, filling him with a black rage as he yelled his demands into the phone. "Put that ungrateful bitch on the phone now, do you hear me you slut. You'll both be sorry you ever messed with me."

Steadily yelling into the phone, cussing Bradley for everything he's worth, she didn't hear the first part of his threat or the last.

Tired of the yelling and screaming, Jessica leaped up and grabbed the phone from Lena, putting it to her ear just in time to hear the last part of his violent threat and the eerie laugh of the damned. Then to her complete astonishment, Stevens snatched the phone out of her hand.

They had all heard what the idiot had said, since he had said it at top volume, sitting the phone back in the charger after pressing the end button. Taking Blondie by her arm she began to struggle with his hold on her, Stevens sat down in the chair he'd been in when they had followed Lena into the kitchen. Yanking once on Jessica's arm taking her off balance, so she was sitting in his lap, at least now, she had some color back in her face.

The second Lena had identified the caller as Jessica's boyfriend, all color had washed out of Jessica's face, and she had looked panicked and frightened. Easing his arms around her, and holding her in place, Blondie felt like an ice cube. Rubbing some warmth

back into her arms with his hands her silky skin was cold and clammy. "He won't get near you, Jessica, I can promise you that." When he got his hands on the bastard, Stevens decided he would tear him apart for treating her like that, making it a promise to himself as he was shooting a look of pure retribution at Gary.

Standing at the kitchen sink, hands gripping the counter top. "I'm sorry Jess; I know it upsets you when I argue with Bastard Bradley." Lena knew she fell short of the mark, but she tried to infuse some small amount of feeling into her apology. In truth what she felt was a driving compulsion to hunt the vile man down and rid the world of his presence.

Relaxing into Stevens, Jessica was still shivering. "Why be sorry when you do it so well." Jessica was mostly embarrassed by the idiot calling her at the house, brows knitting together, how did he know she was here. The only person that knew where she was is Jack her security guard. Rubbing at the center of her forehead trying to figure out why Bradley wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Quit rubbing your forehead, you'll just make it worse." Sitting two of the beers on the table in front of Jessica and taking the other two with him to stand next to Lena. Gary knew Lena had a temper, most redheads did. It was a given, like a big flag waving high and bright. She was inventive with her words to. Glad he was not on the receiving end of her anger, hoping she had calmed some so she wouldn't lash out at him. He sat the beer next to her hand, as he leaned against the counter next to her crossing one ankle over the other. While taking a drink from the beer bottle and the fingers of his other hand played lightly down the front of Lena's arm to her hand, to play with her fingers.

Taking a bottle of aspirin from the shelf above the sink Lena tossed it to Stevens, for Jess. Shocked to see Jess sitting in Stevens lap, Jess was not a lap sitter. Watching him, put two tablets in the palm of Jess's hand Lena knew Jessica was embarrassed by the phone call, she thought picking up the beer with her free hand to take a drink. Sighing to herself while trying to free her other hand from Gary she was not a hand holder, normally. Looking Gary in the eye and hissing under her breath, "Let go of my hand."

"No, I like touching you." Gary could see the temper in her eyes start to flare again. "Jessica needs a glass of water to take the aspirin with." She was still trying to pull her hand free, causing the

corners of his lips to twitch and the dimples wink in a half smile. Leaning closer so they were almost lip-to-lip he could feel her breath feather across his lips again. The emerald green pools of her eyes deepened, darkening with the desire she refused to admit to. Kissing the corner of her mouth lightly he let go of her hand at the same time, deciding to get the water his self, leaving Lena staring blankly where he had been standing. Putting the glass in front of Jess, before sitting in the chair across from Stevens, where he could easily see everyone in the kitchen.

"Thanks." Swallowing the pills and sitting the glass down on the table. Her face felt hot with embarrassment. For god's sake she was sitting in a strange man's lap and he was petting her hair. Every time she tried to get up, he just tightened his hold on her, and if that wasn't enough Jessica could feel his erection pressing against her but.

Stevens looked like he was in some pain. Snort to himself, about damn time Stevens found a woman to give him some problems. Gary thought to his self. Jessica wasn't acting like most women do around Stevens. The struggle between the two was almost funny, one hanging on and the other trying to shake loose. "How long have you been seeing this guy, Jessica?"

Hearing the door to the fridge open, Jessica turned to see Lena stick her head inside, shrugging, after she heard Lena growling and cussing inside the fridge. "Too long!" Shifting hard in Stevens lap, and smirking at his grunt, the look on his face was comical. In her frostiest tone, "Some men don't understand the meaning of the word NO." One finely arched brow rose up, letting Stevens know she was including him. Pressing down on his lap with her hips and twitching to the side hard. The man was too good looking even when he was glaring at her.

Feeling her tense under his hands, if she shifted on him like that again, it would kill him. Jerking her off his lap by the waist Stevens leaned forward to ease the pressure. He took a hard pull from his forgotten beer while groaning. *Shit!* He almost came with the twitch of those hips.

Smoothing her skirt down over her hips and turning her back to the two baboons staring at her. Jessica sincerely hoped Stevens was suffering for his effort. Her hands were not quiet steady as she turned on the broiler for the steaks Lena had just taken out of the

fridge. She could see the ear-to-ear smile on Lena's face out of the corner of her eye. "Stop smiling," sighing to herself. "We should boot them both out the door, instead of feeding them."

Remembering some of the threats Bradley had screamed in her ear, had her brows slamming together, Lena wasn't just mad, she was worried about Jessica's safety now more than ever. Knowing Jessica would balk at the idea of Stevens as a bodyguard. She was for the most part a private and very independent person. "You need to file for a restraining order against Bradley, Jess."

"That'll just make matters worse. He refuses to listen." Jessica could feel, Stevens heated stare on her back, causing an itch to start between her shoulder blades.

Laying the knife down, she was chopping up vegetables with. Lena was ready to argue and shake some sense in to Jessica. Leaning closer so she could look Jess in the eye, "He's whacked out, psycho, you heard what he said, Jess. You're not taking his threats seriously and that worries me." Seeing Stevens stand up at the table she lifted a hand and pointing at him to stay where he was. "I know he's hurt you before and it made me mad that you didn't talk to me about it. Bradley threatened both of our lives this time, so fight me all you want on this it won't matter. I'll hire Stevens as your body guard if that's what it takes to make sure nothing else happens to you, or you can move back home until Bradley's no longer a threat."

Jessica wanted to kick something. She wasn't one for violence, but for the last two days, she had given considerable thought about changing that and knocking all of their hard heads together, for a start. Jess hadn't thought Lena would actually hire Stevens. She did though, bossy heifer, or maybe it was Gary. A body guard for the love of god, just thinking about the big baboon sitting out there on the side of the road in his car. Out of spite, Jessica had kept moving all over town. She was an early bird by nature so she used it to her advantage. Knowing he probably slept in his car, outside her front gates. He was good; she was forced to admit it even to herself. Though, she would never willingly tell him that to his pretty face. He had followed her from store to store in the mall and all over the city of Daytona. Not saying a word to her or anyone else, if he wasn't five steps from her side, Jess would find him at

the front door of the store she had gone in. Standing upright, feet spread, body tense with his hands clasped behind his back, scanning the crowd around him.

Now, Jessica was just tired of the whole ordeal. The phone had been ringing every couple of minutes until she finally turned the ringer off, letting the machine pick up the calls. All of them were from Bradley, including the ones to her cell, adding up to a crazy one hundred seventy nine calls. After listening to the first message, where he was yelling, cussing, whining and then switching back to his smooth normal southern voice. She had deleted all of the messages without listening to the rest. She was almost glad the baboon was out front with her security guard. After packing what she might need late last night, Jessica had finally admitted to herself, Lena was right about Bradley being mentally unstable.

Standing on the back porch sipping her coffee and smoking the first cigarette of the morning... Ugh! 5 am came to early this morning. Looking at the clipboard laying on the railing, "I would snarl at you if it would do me any good." Friday's were like any other day, except this one, the day before the race. Rich was the only runner going to Tampa, so there was no need to pack up feed and overnight gear. The jockey, Alex Lorenzo, would be meeting them there, check. Some fence boards in the broodmare paddock needed to be replaced; little Lenny can take care of it while he's on that side of the farm today. Crushing out her cigarette to finish jotting a few more notes for different things on the two page list, carrying it with her back into the kitchen for more coffee.

"Oh, good morning honey. How is Jess doing?" Anna asked. "You look tired; did you get in late last night?"

"Yeah, but I guess it was worth it. Jessica is doing okay, she will be here about 10 o'clock this morning, and I asked her to come home and stay with us for a while.

"I'm glad she's coming home, I've missed her since she moved to her own place." Anna said hoping her daughter wouldn't notice being rushed along. "Have a good morning honey; I don't want to keep you." Anna had seen a weakening in her present life as she knew it over the last two years. Now the hunting of her friends all but confirmed it. She would feel much better with Jessica at home with her.

Dumping the rest of her coffee in the sink and placing the cup in the dishwasher. "Are you pushing me out the door, mom?" Looking at her mom's back, as she was all ready pulling out cookbooks. Shaking her head, knowing her and Jess would eat like queens tonight. Grabbing the clipboard, she headed for the main barn.

"You were out late last night!" Gary said.

Glancing at her watch, hmmm "I guess you're right." Walking passed Gary without even looking at him. Thinking to herself, *ha, ha*, we are going for frigid subzero this morning. "Has everyone been feed?" Lena opened Rich's stall door and looked to see if he was done, murmuring to him, she rubbed his neck, Lena didn't have to look to know Gary was standing behind her.

"Yes, everyone has been fed and the turnouts are also done."

Turning around to face Gary, "I need by, there's still work to be done."

"I'm still waiting for an answer to last night's question."

Frustration had taken up residence, dogging him like a second shadow for the last two days.

Shoving him out of the way was not going to work since she was out-matched in height and weight. Eyes darkening and narrowing to slits, "Gary leave me alone, I have work to do and so do you." She noticed her fingers had curled into fists, telling herself to relax; even though plowing a fist into his pretty-white teeth would be wonderful.

Stepping aside so she could get through, he leaned a shoulder on the wall next to the doorway. "Okay, there I moved." Gary said crossing his arms over his chest.

"I told you last night I don't answer to you." Stepping out to close the stall door, "have you seen little Lenny? I saw some boards yesterday that need to be-replaced. Find him and let him know it needs to be done today, I have some calls to make." Lena glanced at her watch, then looking around to make sure everything is in its rightful place and walked in to the office leaving Gary standing-alone in the shed row.

Looking at Rich in the stall next to him with his big head hanging over the stall door, "She thinks she got the last word in, doesn't she. We'll just see about that." Marching into the office, ready to

do battle if that's what it took, only to be-brought up short by the phone ringing.

Picking up the cordless, "Matthews farm, Lena speaking."

"Good morning sunshine, you always sound so professional when you answer the phone."

"Morning, Jess. I was just about to call you."

"You would've missed me. I am already packed and ready to go; Lela is slobbering all over the leash she's been carrying around all morning. So we'll be there in about 15 minutes or so."

Looking up from her papers with the phone to her ear, seeing Gary standing in the doorway frowning at her, "That's great I'll let mom know you're on your way over. Bye." Pushing the end button on the phone and laying it a side, not taking her eyes off Gary. "Did you have something you were going to say?"

Still leaning against the doorway, "What was that all about?"

"That was none of your business." Lena said, looking down at the papers littering her desk. She decided they could wait, a little longer, to be dealt with. "I'm going up to the house for a few minutes." Walking toward the doorway where Gary was still leaning, looking at the cell phone hooked to his belt, listening to it ring for the second time. "You should probably answer your cell."

"If you think you're going to shake me off that easily, you're wrong." Straightening from the doorway, "I'll just go on up to the house with you."

"Yeah, you'll just bat your pretty eyes at my mother so she'll fed you breakfast, go ahead." Hearing Gary's cell ring for a fourth time, made her grind her teeth. "Would you like me to answer your cell for you? Obviously someone wants to talk to you now not later."

Stepping back from the doorway to watch Lena as she walked away, okay this is bad. Thinking to himself he glanced at the display on the cell to see who was calling him this early in the morning. Rubbing the muscles in the back of his neck trying to get rid of the tension his brows slammed together after listening to the message, *Oh Hell!* Following Lena to make sure she had already went inside, stopping just outside the barn. Leaning against the doorway so he looked relaxed, this was exactly not how he was feeling now. Seeing Stevens number on his cell, Gary knew his

morning was fixing to go straight to hell, pushing the talk key, "Okay damn it answer your cell, come on, and come on."

Checking around the house to make sure she had not forgotten anything. "Lela come on girl let's get a move on." At the bottom of the staircase, Lela was sitting with her leash still in her mouth. "So I guess you're ready to go visit Lena and Anna?"

Jumping up, her tail swinging from side to side Lela started whining, her way of saying, "Oh boy a car ride, hurry, hurry let's go."

Coming down the stairs, "Okay let's go" Just as Jessica reached for the doorknob, the phone rang. Glancing over her shoulder toward the kitchen, then down at Lela. "We'll just let the machine get that." Opening the door Lela shot out passed her to race around the car skidding to a halt at the passenger side door, waiting for her to open it. "Are you excited or what?" Swinging the car door open, Jessica asked as Lela hopped in the front seat.

"Ah, here we go big girl." Strapping the seat belt over Lela, shoving her suitcase in the trunk and sliding in behind the wheel. "Would we like the top down for our ride this morning? Why yes, we would thank you very much." Laughing out loud, she ruffled Lela's hairy head, quickly leaning back before Lela could show her gratitude with a big slobbery tongue. "And we're off."

Pulling through the gates, she waved to Jack. Lela woofing her good byes, Looking to the right Jessica could see Stevens car parked next to the big oak tree at the edge of her property line, knowing how long it's been there, she turned to the right to check it out. Lela whining in protest, knowing this is not the way to Lena's house. "It'll just take a moment to look and make sure everything is okay. Pulling up next to the car, she looked in the car windows. "Well looks like he's left his car, must be walking around some where Lela, there's no one here." Yes, she talked to her dog all the time, maybe too much.

Whipping a U-turn in the road, squealing the tires, Jessica laughed. Passing her guard shack again, waving as they flew by.

Heart racing from his morning run, and sweat dripping from his brow, Stevens reached in his back pocket for a bandana. Using it to wipe at the sweat while sitting on the ground he punched in Gary's

number, the voicemail to pick up. Waiting for the beep, he listened to the recorded message, "This is Lieutenant Wellington, I will be out of the office for an uncertain period of time, please leave a brief message as I will be checking them regularly."

Climbing back into the car, as he was digging the keys out of his pocket while talking into his cell phone "6:20 a.m., she just packed her and her dog in that little car and left, I'll follow her and check back." Ending the call with an oath, he tossed the cell phone on the seat, where the hell is she going this early in the morning, maybe she's finally come to her senses and decided to move back to the farm, he hoped pulling out on the road.

"*Damn it, Blondie is making me crazy*; muttering to myself won't help." He kept the car at a normal speed until he passed the guard shack and then gunning the motor hoping to catch up with the little red car. Seeing nothing but big oak trees and pavement ahead, "Where the hell is she going in such a hurry? It better be the farm and not another shopping spree like she'd been having the last two days." Grumbling to his self, I need a shower, a shave and a bed with a decent night sleep and not necessarily in that order.

Slowing down to take a curve to the right, Stevens saw part of a tail lights just barely hidden by the trees. "Who the hell would park their car there?" Making a mental note of location, "I'll come back and check it out, as soon as I make sure where Blondie's destination is."

Checking his watch and accelerating to an unsafe 95 mph coming out of the curve. Trees giving way to beautiful rolling green pastures on the left, "Shit, shit Oh so there you are." Parking on the side of the road at the entrance of the farm, using his binoculars to see what was going on. Okay, so she's pulling her suitcases out of the trunk of her car. "Now let's check out that tail light in the bushes." Muttering an oath, as he heard his cell phone ring, hoping no one else heard it, like there's anyone else out this time of a morning in the god forsaking country, he thought yanking open the car door, snatching the phone off the seat. "Yeah, Stevens here" Starting the car, backing out on to the main road, to head back to where he'd seen the tail light hiding in the bushes.

"Hey Stevens, how's it going?" Gary said, hoping a cheerful tone would lighten Stevens bad mood.

"Fine, Blondie's at the farm, looks like she's staying for awhile, she has her suit case and it looked like some boxes from what I could see. I'm headed back to her place now to check out a car hidden in the bushes about a mile or so west of her place."

"What do you mean, hidden in the bushes?"

"I'll call you back in a minute, I'm almost there." Snapping the cell closed and tossing it on the passenger's seat as he came round the curve where he had seen the tail light. You still here, are you or at least your car is. Slowing to a normal speed to check out the guard shack coming closer Stevens noticed the door to the guard shack was standing wide open and looked deserted.

He reached under the seat to get his gun, just as he was pulling into the driveway. Stopping half on half off the road, he could see the gates were open just enough for someone to walk through on foot. Knowing no one was home, Stevens listened for any sound to give away the location of the intruder. Glancing over at the guard shack he wondered where the kid was, muttering to him-self, *"Hell this can't be good."*

Crouched down he quietly moved to the side of the guard shack under the windows, moving slowly toward the door. His finger on the trigger, he slowly edged closer trying to see inside leaning forward just enough, to look out the corner of his eye to see inside, mentally cussing a blue streak when he saw the guard lying on the floor in a pool of blood.

Hearing metal scraping against metal Stevens looked through the rod iron gates scanning the front for any sign of movement. He slowly move backward with his gun aimed and ready still crouched taking cover behind the open car door, glancing over at his cell just out of reach. "Shit," leaning over to grab it, feeling around in the seat, not taking his eyes from the area he could see through the gates. Pushing the silence button on the side of the phone he flipped it open and dialed 911.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"Listen carefully; you need to send an ambulance and the sheriff out here. Tell them no sirens the guard has been shot, and the intruder is still here and he is armed. My car is parked in the driveway.

"Please stay on the line sir, while I dispatch the sheriff."

"I can't, I have another call to make, just tell them I'm one of the good guys and no sirens." Pressing the end button he dialed Gary's cell number again.

"What's going on?" Gary paced up and down the shed row of the main barn working up a sweaty good mad waiting for Stevens call.

"Where are you?" Stevens said.

"Enjoying some country air you sound like there's a problem."

"Yes, there's a problem, Miss Lane's guard has a big hole in his chest not to mention, I'm pretty sure, he's dead. You need to get over here now; the sheriff is on the way. The intruder is still here on the property. Somewhere back behind the house."

"Don't move I'm on my way now. Stay with your car and wait." Walking quickly to the rig parked next to the barn, hearing the screen door slam, Gary looked over to see Lena come out just as Jessica was pulling a suit case from her car in the driveway. He jumped in the truck and slammed the door shut. "Well now, shit on a post," cranking the wheel hard, tossing a wave at Lena and Jessica like nothing's wrong as he passed.

"Where the hell is he going?" Lena asked not really expecting Jess to answer. Maybe he changed his mind about having breakfast with us, she thought to herself as she shrugged her shoulders.

Watching Gary drive by, waving to him before looking back at Lena. "Looks like I'm just in time for the fireworks. Come on; help me get this stuff out of the trunk, while you tell me about your morning." Jess said grabbing two of the boxes and heading for the back door. "You know you want to talk about it, so just spit it out."

Hearing the sheriff cruisers pull into the drive behind his car, "About damn time someone got here." mumbling to himself. "Where the hell is Wellington?" Quickly, looking over his left shoulder, to see the two sheriffs taking aim on him behind the cover of their car doors.

"Put your gun down, hands behind your head, now." The Deputy said from behind the driver's door of the sheriff's cruiser.

"Listen, keep your voice down, I can hear you clearly enough, with my left hand I'm going to reach for my ID, I'm a P. I., I'm the one that called this in, the guard inside there is dead." Pulling the ID out of his back pocket and flipping it open, so the Deputies could see it, his gun and eyes still on the front of the house.

"I'm coming up behind you, don't move, and stay just as you are," moving, from behind the door of the cruiser, quickly to the back of the guy's car. "Toss your ID back behind you." Flipping the ID open, "Okay now tell me why a P.I. is out here, at Miss Lane's house, with a dead security guard?"

"God save me from fools," Stevens muttered, looking over to his right just as a truck came to a screeching stop.

"Who the hell is that?" The deputy said not realizing he had spoken out loud.

"Lieutenant Wellington, Atlanta P.D.," Stevens said his tone dripping with sarcasm.

Opening the door to his rig, hearing gunfire had Gary ducking down and closing the door quietly. He had both Glocks, one in each hand, safety off pointing at the ground as he duck walked quickly behind Stevens, car. "Intruder is still on the property?"

"You boys need to hand over your guns and get back while the sheriff's department takes care of this." Daniels didn't give a shit who these two thought they were. This was his case and his first bust.

Gary leaned forward. "Listen up Daniels, the guard in there is already dead. The one who shot him at point black range is not going to care two shits of Sunday if he blows your head right off your shoulders. Now the best thing to do is to go in as a team. Low and steady. On my lead, I want you in the middle with Stevens bringing up the rear, is that understood?" He made a firm nod in the other Deputy's direction still taking cover behind the door of his cruiser. "Have your partner call in for more back up."

Keying up the mike hooked to his shoulder, "Allen, call it in and stay with the car."

Daniels couldn't be more than twenty-three, twenty-four tops. "Stevens, cover us, when we reach that pump house, we'll cover you." They would be out in the open for five to six seconds, nodding to Stevens before he took off around the front of the car and through the open gate, in a crouched run. Both arms extended out in front of him, scanning the perimeter on the move. Daniels, close on his heels as they stopped behind the pump house. The racket coming from behind the house suddenly stopped, as Stevens stepped behind the pump house next to Daniels.

"Noisy bastard isn't he?" Daniels said rather loudly.

Turning to silence the rookie with a hard glare, at the same time Stevens smacked him on the back of his head. Daniels face was flaming red hot with anger. Looking back down the east side of the house, Gary could only see the first six feet of the big shop in the back no doors or windows just solid steel siding. Signaling for the Deputy to wait there and Stevens to cover him, Gary headed for the front of the rap around porch, then for him to take the west side of the house. Moving quickly behind, a big magnolia tree, halfway between the pump house and porch knowing Stevens was already on the move, waiting for him to take cover, Gary made his way to the porch dropping down below the planks out of site.

As Gary turn his head to signal the rookie, who was already jogging upright toward him, Gary motioning for the Deputy to get down with his hand as Daniels eyes locked onto something in the distance at the other end of the porch. Spinning quickly toward the sound of gun fire, he aimed and fired both guns at the person running for cover as he held his position.

"Daniels?" Nothing but silence, Gary risked a quick glance over his shoulder, Daniels was down. Moving toward him while scanning the front of the house for Stevens, probably moved to the back of the house. Dropping down next to Daniels, "Shit," Gary pressed his fingers hard on the side of the rookie's neck, where the blood was pumping out fast. A bullet had severed his jugular, searching for a pulse with his other fingers, pressing under the kids jaw. Nothing, turning the rookies face toward him, Gary noticed another entry wound, the fatal one. Taking his fingers from the rookie's neck, looking down at them, they were coated and dripping with blood.

"Well damn it, what the hell happen?" Stevens said approaching from Gary's left.

"First two shoots the gun man got off. I take it he got a way?"

"Scaled the back fence," Looking up at the sound of more cars pulling up in the driveway out front. "There's a rope ladder back there, I pulled it down on this side of the stone wall. From all the tracks back there, I'd say it's been used as an entrance and exit for some time." Rubbing his face with both of his hands before glancing back down at the rookie, what a waste, damn kid should have stayed in the car. Yanking his Stetson off his head Stevens banged it against his left leg in frustration. "Looks like the boss,

has showed up.” Stevens said jamming the Stetson back in place on top of his head. Stevens was ready to rip into who ever had sent a kid out into the field.

“Leave it alone, Stevens.” Gary had seen that look in Stevens eyes before, “Let me talk to him.”

“I wasn’t going to say much.” Deputies with no training should not be out in the field responding to calls with live fire.

“Yeah right, I’ve known you too long to believe that kinda bullshit.” The other deputy, Allen was following a bigger guy and talking quickly, probably filling him in on what happen.

“Are you, Wellington?” He barked.

“Yes sir and this is Stevens. He’s with me.” Gary had noticed the big guy was breathing hard; his face was flushed and sweating. They heard the big man suck in a wheezing breath as he dropped to his knees beside the rookie.

“Sir, Mr. Wellington,”

Looking over at Deputy Allen, Gary following his head nods to give the big man a moment alone. “Come on Stevens.” The three of them stopped by the big gates, glancing back at the man kneeling in the blood soaked grass next to the rookie.

“Daniels was the Captains youngest son. Figured he’d want a moment alone before he talked to you. Even though I already told him what happen, he knows it’s not your fault Mr. Wellington.”

“You’re damn right it’s not his fault.” Stevens snapped at the young Deputy causing him to flinch.

“Cool it Stevens,” keeping his voice low. “Why did two rookies respond to a shooting?”

“We were about three miles east of here when the call came through, Daniels radioed in our location, but he didn’t wait for the dispatcher to relay the situation.” Deputy Allen looked down at his hat as he was running the rim of it through his hands in circles. “He shut the radio off and told me that we would be the first to respond, so this would be our bust.”

Gary stood next to Stevens, “How long have you been on patrol Allen?”

“Eight months, sir.” He said flinching at the abrupt movement of Stevens.

“Damn Stupid kids.” Stevens jerked his Stetson back off his head, slapping it hard against his left leg twice before jamming back in place and stalking off to his car, cussing low and violently.

“What’s eating him?”

“Rookies!” Gary said, deciding to leave it at that as the Captain was approaching them.

“Tell me what the hell went on here this morning, Wellington? On second thought, I want you and Stevens in my office within the hour!”

Gary didn’t say anything as he watched the captain walk out the gate, climb in his cruiser and drive away. Gary was hoping the rest of his cover such as it was, wasn’t fixing to be, blown to hell and back. Walking over to Stevens, “That the forensics team that just went in?”

“Yep, told them all I could.”

“We have to go back to the farm I need talk to Lena and Jessica.” Gary said checking the time, “We’ve got about forty five minutes before we’re expected in the Captains office to give our statement.

Seeing the blood on Gary’s hands, “You need to wash up some first, or you’ll scare both Lena and Jessica if they see all that blood on you before you tell them what happen.”

“Shit.” Walking back over to the pump house he cranked on the faucet. Ice-cold water started flowing out; the blood had already dried on his hands. Scrubbing as much off as possible, turning the facet off and wondering if he had a towel in the rig to dry his hands on.

“Catch.” Stevens said and slid in to his car after tossing him the towel.

“Thanks see you at the farm.” Climbing back into the rig, Gary put both of his guns in the console and locked it with the key. Whipping a u-turn after Stevens pulled out of the driveway, he follow him back to the farm. What was he going to say that won’t blow their cover and how was he going to explain to Jessica, that her unarmed security guard was gunned down along with the young Deputy Daniels. Not to mention her house and property was now a crime scene and she wouldn’t be allowed back on the property until after it was cleared. Gary turned into the drive making his way to the house, with these thoughts and questions still rattling around in his head and no clear answer to any of it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sitting the last of the four boxes of her parent's stuff she had brought with her on the bed. Jessica looked around her old bedroom; everything still looked the same. She had left all the bedroom furniture here when she had bought her own place, thinking her mom might redecorate it after she moved out. Opening her suitcase to put away the clothes she packed. "Where did Gary take off to so fast?" she asked.

"Hell who knows?" Lena had been wondering the same thing for the last thirty minutes. Trying to check her watch without being noticed, as she was wondering what was in the boxes. "Is this some of your parents stuff?" She asked as she checked the outside of the box to see if it was marked. Her body was throbbing with a strange sort of anticipation. The nagging voice in the back of her mind whispered, "*Finally, I will be free to protect.*" Lena frowned at the box as if it held all the answers.

"Yeah, I looked through one box a few days ago that was marked clothes and there were all kinds of stuff in there. After opening three, more I realized, none are organized or marked correctly. Things were just tossed into the boxes."

"I could help go through some of this stuff, if you want." She said dropping down on the bed, as she watched Jessica unpack her suitcase. "It's good to have you home again."

"I love my place, but I just realized I missed being here with you and mom,"

Folding back the tissue paper, she had carefully covered the dress in. Lifting out the slip of a dress in kick ass red. The smooth, clingy, Lycra material would mold its self to every dip and curve of her body like a second skin. Strapless with a plunging V in the back, held together just under the shoulder blades by a slim strand of the same fabric the hem stopping at mid thigh.

Lena sucked in a gasp of pure female lust and her voice a whisper of awe. "*Daammnn!*" Her fingers itched to touch. "Where did you

get it?" Oh, the smug look on Jessica's face. "Guess you're going out this weekend?"

"No, we're going out. See and to be seen. There's one for you also."

Coming back to the suitcase after carefully, putting her dress away, to-slowly-unfold the tissue paper covering the second dress. "I've been shopping for the last two days, and I happened to find this great little boutique that just opened yesterday."

"You've been shopping for two days straight?" Lena smiled at the thought of Stevens going shopping with Jessica.

"Yes, it really irritated me when I had seen that baboon following me home."

Covering her mouth as the first giggle escaped. "Oh my God, what did you do?"

Giving Lena sideways glance with a smug little smile on her face, "Why, I went to every clothing and shoe store in the city of Daytona."

Lena laughed hard, at the thought of Stevens following Jessica all over the city for two full days shopping for clothes. Lena wiped her eyes with her fingers, trying to clear them. "What did he say?"

"Not one word, absolutely nothing. I can't believe you hired him as my bodyguard."

"I didn't. After you left, I told him I wanted to hire him and he just glared at me and walked out the door after you."

"Then Gary hired him?"

"I guess, since Gary had him following you to begin with, but I'm not sure. I've tried asking Gary about it, but he just changes the subject."

Hearing the rig, coming back down the driveway, she said, "Gary's back, I wonder where he's been this morning?" Jessica said as she took the dress out of the box.

Shrugging her shoulders and waving a hand at Jessica's question is if she didn't care. Lena was more interested in the dress, Jessica was holding up. "Oh my, is that one mine?" It was the same color as her hair.

"Mmmm... yes, what do you think, do you like it?"

Lena took a deep breath, while patting a hand to her chest. "Are you kidding me?" She was trying not to drool while looking at the dress, imagining it against her skin. Lena had been thinking about

buying a new dress to torture Gary with the next time they had a girl's night-out. Without taking her eyes off the dress, "There's a party tomorrow night after the race in Tampa. It's at a place called Down Under. Everyone who's anyone will be there."

"Really, isn't that handy as I'll be going with you tomorrow." She said, carefully hanging the dress, next to hers, closing the closet door and leaning against it.

"Come on let's go find out where Mr. sexy went in such a hurry." Grabbing Jessica's hand, Lena pulled her from the room and down the stairs just as they heard the kitchen door shut.

Going to the sink, Gary squirted dish soap in his hand to scrub off the rest of the blood. Pouring Stevens and himself a cup of coffee he took them both to the table and sat in one of the chairs. Propping his elbows on the table, he scrubbed his face with clean hands and then ran them through his hair. Hearing someone coming down the stairs, he knew by the sound it had to be Lena and Jessica. "Here goes the rest of the day!"

Sitting at the end of the table, legs stretched out in front of him crossed at the ankles. His body reacted almost violently at the sight of Jessica walking into the kitchen. Grinding his back teeth in frustration, she had tried to lose him a couple of times in the last two days. Only a mild irritation, what tipped the scales was the grinding need he felt for her. Ten times worse than any teenage hormonal moment, he had ever experienced. Patting his thigh, "You can sit in my lap again sugar." Stevens said in a low southern drawl.

"Lena, Jessica, have a seat." Gary said pointing at the chairs on the other side of the table.

Stopping next to the island counter, Lena knew what ever Gary was about to say could only be bad news. Leaning back against the smooth granite of the counter top she gripped the edges. "I'll stand thanks," Jessica didn't seem incline to take a chair either. "What's going on, Gary?"

Sliding his gaze over to Jessica, "Jessica have you had any problems with trespassers?"

"No not that I know of why?" She said glancing at Gary as she answered his question. Her stomach was churning painfully after seeing the cold hard look in Stevens eyes, which had killed the

little thrill she had felt at his playfulness, when she looked again at his eyes just to make sure she wasn't mistaken. Glancing from Gary to Stevens and then back to Gary, she could hear in her mind one of them thinking but she couldn't pin it down.

Waving his hand at the other chairs around the table, "Both of you need to sit down," Stevens said, he hadn't moved from the slouched position in the chair. Jessica and Lena just stared at him. "Fine stand there then," From the expression on Jessica's face, Stevens could tell she knew they were messengers of bad news.

Turning slightly in his chair, legs parallel with the side of the table, "Go ahead, tell them Stevens, you were first on scene."

Scene, what the hell was he talking about? Jessica wanted to press a hand to her queasy stomach. Realizing she was staring at Stevens. Something had happened at her house, after she had left. "What Scene, your car was sitting at my house when I left?"

"That's right, I followed you here, then I went back to check out a car hidden in the trees just before the curve, down from your fence line. I saw the door to the guard shack standing open and nobody around that I could tell from that distance, so I parked in the driveway to check on your security guard."

"Did someone run off the road?"

"No," Stevens knew straight out was best way. Say it fast get it over and done. "Don't know who the car belong to, yet. Someone shot your security guard, Jessica."

"Jack, someone shot Jack?" Pressing a fist to her stomach, it felt as if someone had just kicked her, the sharp pain doubling her over.

Scooping her up, as she doubled over and gently as possible, Stevens put her in the chair where he had been sitting, before squatting down in front of her. He pushed the hair covering her face behind her ears. "There's more babe, if you feel faint put your head between your knees."

Closing her eyes she gripped the chair on both sides of her, as if her body might rocket out of it, by its self. Looking up at Stevens, "Is he okay, did the ambulance take him to the hospital?"

"He's gone Jessica; there was nothing we could have done, that would have brought him back. I noticed the gates were open, so I called 911 and Gary. I could hear someone banging on metal in the back, behind the house."

"That's where you went?" Lena hadn't moved from the Island counter, glancing over at Gary quickly to make sure he was okay, she noticed a dark red spot covering his whole right knee. She knew it was blood, but still she puzzled over it. "Why is there blood on your jeans?"

"Let me finish," giving Gary a determined glare. "After two sheriff deputies and Gary showed up, we went in."

Shooting a hot glare at Gary then Stevens, Lena wanted to smack some sense into them both. Her eyebrows slammed together, "Why would a thoroughbred horse trainer and a body guard/P.I., go into a crime scene with two Sheriff Deputies? Are you freaking crazy?"

"Only one of the deputies went in with me and Stevens, and No I'm not crazy." Lena's mind was sharp, Gary wondered if she would figure it out. He could see the thought of them going in, what was a potentially dangerous situation, making her mad, as he watched her eyes began to spark and he readjusted that thought quickly. To Livid. "We made it to the wraparound porch at the front of the house. Then the intruder open fire on us." Noticing the time, "We'll have to explain the rest later. The Captain is waiting for us at the Sheriff substation."

"Whose blood is that on your pants?" Lena asked staring at the big spot that covered the whole knee; he didn't seem to be hurt anywhere that she could tell.

Parking in the visitor section, the outside of the building looked like someone's house, Red brick and white vinyl siding with well maintained landscaping. Inside the front double doors, the entryway walls, painted a soft creamy white accented with a chair rail and a boarder matching the Mediterranean slate colored tile. They stopped at the receptionist counter that spanned from wall to wall blocking all access to the rooms beyond. The receptionist at least six foot tall, her coal black hair braided, ending in the middle of her back was finishing taking a message as Gary and Stevens approached the counter.

"May I help you?"

"Yes ma'am, we have an appointment with Captain Daniels."

"You're names?"

"Gary Wellington and Stevens"

"Just one moment, I'll let him know you're here."

"Thanks!"

Sitting in one of the chairs across from Lena and Jessica, "The captain or whoever is working the case will need to speak with you Jessica." Lena and Jessica hadn't said a word since leaving the house. Gary knew from the look on both their faces that they were feeling shock and denial, their world was slightly off tilt and out of focus.

"Sir if you and Mr. Stevens will come with me I'll take you back to the captain's office."

"Jessica, I'll let the captain know you're here, Okay."

"Yes, thank you Gary."

Standing at the door next to Gary, waiting for the receptionist to release the security lock, "How long do you think they'll hold up?" Stevens asked, looking over his shoulder at Jessica. Jessica and Lena looked very pale and fragile, sitting there on the dark hunter green sofa. Following a deputy and Gary back, past the desks where two other deputies were working. The idea of leaving them sitting out in the waiting area by themselves, didn't sit well with him.

"Have a seat both of you, which one of you called into 911?" Captain Daniels asked.

The Captain looked grief stricken, but holding on and doing his job. "I did sir."

"Tell me from the start what the hell happened, Stevens?"

Explaining in detail what happen, as quickly as possible and ending with. "Ms. Lane and Ms. Matthews are waiting in the lobby out front."

God she was cold clear to her bone marrow. Her mind kept circling around everything Gary and Stevens had told them back at the house. She just could not get a firm grip on how and why this happen. Her stomach was cramped up and refused to loosen, she just wanted to go home and lay down, but she couldn't go home. It was a crime scene. Clamping a hand over her mouth as a sob ripped from her throat. No, she was not going to cry, not yet, not now. She had to wait. There were things that needed to be done, she knew there was. Jack's fiancé, how was she going to tell that sweet girl that Jack was gone, never to come home again? Feeling

a hand curl around hers offering support. "Why, Lena? Why would someone do this to me?"

"I don't know, honey, I really don't know. Maybe after the sheriff talks to us, they may know, or asks some questions that'll give them some direction to find out."

At least this sheriff station was not like the cold unwelcoming, smelly police station she had answered questions in after her mom and dad had been killed in the car wreck. The irritation she had felt then, spread through her like a wild fire clearing some of the fog from her mind. Yeah, questions. The cops had had questions then to, it had seemed like days had passed while she had tried to answer their questions over, and over again. What happened, did she remember? Did she hear anything? On and on until she felt like screaming at the insensitive bastards, acting like she was the criminal, not the victim that had just had her world ripped to shreds around her. They hadn't cared that her parents were gone and never coming back. They just wanted answers, well Not this time, NO.

I'll be asking some questions and someone will answer them, Jessica thought to herself. The frightened, grieving teenager she had been then, not knowing what was going to happen next, was gone. Snapping her spine straight, Jess squeezed Lena's hand thanking her for the support, she was giving. Questions lined up like soldiers in her mind. Hearing someone call her name, Jessica turned to see Stevens holding the security door open.

"The Captain would like to ask you a few questions."

Her spine ramrod straight, every step screamed and demanded answers. Entering the office she stopped in front of the desk, looking the big man in the eye. "First I want answers, before I answer anything."

Leaning back in his chair, Captain Daniels kept his face blank and impassive. This one had a chip on her shoulder the size of Texas. Wondering at the cause as he waved a hand at the empty chair Stevens had vacated. "If you'll have a seat, Miss Lane I'll try to give you the answers you need."

Nodding her thanks to the big man in front of her and keeping her voice brisk and all business as she continued to stand at the desk in front of him. "Was the killer caught?"

"No." He said, folding his hands over his round belly.

"And why the hell not, how could he have gotten away?" Jessica demanded, felt like screaming and stomping her foot.

"We're searching for the person who shot the guard, Miss Lane."

Waving a hand to her left at Gary and Stevens, not breaking eye contact with the big man sitting behind the desk, "They explained part of what happened but not everything. What did they leave out? Has anyone contacted Jack's fiancé? Was there any damage done to my property?" Firing her questions off, not giving any time for the big man answer. His slouch passive attitude made her blood boil.

Stepping between Jessica and Captain Daniel's desk, Stevens took her by the arm and roughly pushed her down in the chair behind her, letting some of his own temper into his voice making it low and hard. "The gunman killed his son this morning, before fleeing the scene." Giving her a little shake, he knew she was upset; her entire body was vibrating like it was fixing to explode. Easing his grip on her arms, he rubbed them from shoulder to elbow. "He's here to help you, just like the rest of us, babe."

Closing her eyes and taking a shuddering breath. "I'm truly sorry for your loss; I know what you're going through."

The woman's outburst didn't bother him much, he had seen worse from grief stricken relatives and friends. "Thank you Miss Lane, can you think of any reason someone would kill your security guard and try to break into your shop?"

This did not make any sense at all to her. "No not at all."

"What do you have stored in there? Anything of value that someone might have seen you put in there?"

Damn, this was getting crazier by the minute. Her parents stuff was the only thing she had stored in the big shop. Jessica couldn't remember anything of great value that would be worth killing someone over. "My parent's things are all that's in there."

"Why do you have your parents things stored at your place Miss Lane?"

Jess wished Stevens would move away from her. He was standing so close to her shoulder that she could feel the body heat pumping off him like a furnace. At the same time in her heart, she wished he would hold her. Run his fingers through her hair and make her forget this horrible nightmare, while her mind was saying back off. "They were killed in a car accident several years ago."

After I bought the house I moved everything at the storage unit to my place.”

“Okay. Is there anything of value in there?”

“Not that I know of, it’s been years since everything was packed. Did the gunman get into the shop?”

“There is some minor damage to the door, but no one got in, you’ll need an accident report for your insurance company I would imagine.” Making a note in the file to have a copy of the report ready as soon as possible, “Miss Lane, have you had any problems with people coming on to your property while you’re either away or at any other time?”

Shaking her head no, “Jack would’ve known if anyone had come onto the property, since there are security cameras all over the place and they record at 72 hour intervals with monitors in the guard shack, linked to all the cameras. But he never said anything about someone trespassing.”

“Do you have someplace else to stay until we can release the crime scene? You won’t be allowed on the property for a while.”

A racking shutter started at her feet and shot its way up her body. “Yes, I’ll be staying with Lena at the Matthews Farm.”

“Okay, I’m sure there’ll be more questions the detective assigned to the case will need to ask you Miss Lane. If you have, any questions please feel free to call me. I’ll try to answer them for you the best I can.”

“Thank you.”

“Not a problem, anytime, if you and Miss Matthews would please wait in the lobby, I would appreciate it.” Seeing the questioning look past between the two women, then at Wellington and Stevens before leaving, settling back in his chair waiting for the door close. “I have an idea why you’re down here, Wellington.” Then he looked at Stevens, “Now explain to me why you were tailing Miss Lane in the first place?”

“I’ve been hired as her bodyguard sir.” Stevens was not feeling very indulgent at the moment, giving only the barest of facts.

“Why would Miss Lane need a bodyguard before this morning?”

He knew the routine, he might be an ex cop, but the training never left you. Looking at Gary, not knowing how much information he should share with Captain.

“Sir, Stevens is here in Daytona with me. After witnessing more than one public confrontation Miss Lane had with her ex-boyfriend, I had Stevens follow her to make sure she would be okay.”

Bushy eyebrows, rising, “I suppose she knows about this since the four of you are here at my office and doubt seriously she appreciates it. Where will the two of you be staying in case you need to be contacted?”

“The Matthews farm Sir.” Gary could feel a smile tugging at the corners of his lips when the Captain rolled his eyes upward to the ceiling.

“I should’ve known, just one more question before I cut you two loose. Do they know why you’re here in Daytona?”

“No sir, they don’t, Miss Matthews hired me about a month ago, as her trainer.”

Will wonders never cease? So far, he liked Wellington and Stevens, though Stevens looked like he could be a hothead. Maybe that was why he felt the need to share some advice with these two men. “Okay,” nodding his head slowly, “Now I’ll give you some free advice. Miss Lane and Miss Matthews seem like pretty-sharp women, and from the way Miss Matthews was watching you Wellington I’d say if she doesn’t have you figured out by this afternoon or tomorrow at the latest, it won’t be long. But, I’ll feel better with you and Stevens at the farm keeping a watch on things. If you plan to stay for any length of time, then I would suggest both of you come clean with why you are really down here from Atlanta. Women like those two, will not take kindly to being lied to or manipulated for any reason.” Nodding his head again, “Now get the women home and if you need anything call me.” Taking two of his cards and tossing them on the desk close to Gary, waving his hand toward the door for them to leave as he picked up the phone with the other hand, to put in a call to the Atlanta PD.

Sitting in the backseat of the crew cab rig, looking out the window, they would be passing her house in a few minutes. Jessica didn’t want to look, and see the strange people crawling all over her property. She felt violated in, the worst way. Since she had bought the house, the place had become her sanctuary.

Why? Why would someone want to break into her place? Hearing Lena muttering to herself, she realized they were pulling into the farm already. "Why was someone trying to break into the shop?" She said not realizing she had spoken out loud.

"I don't know Jess." Lena hated to see her like this, noticing the time. Shit not even 10 a.m. yet thanking God she had competent employees working for her, so she didn't need someone standing over them making sure things were done. The way Gary and Stevens had acted while talking to the captain puzzled her, Lena thought shaking her head. Really didn't matter there were more-important things, to worry about, than other people's odd quirks.

Going directly to the coffee maker to start a fresh pot listening to the chairs lightly scraped back from the table. "Whose blood is on your jeans?" Lena asked with her back to the room as she measured out the coffee grounds.

"I'm going up to change." Hope fading a bit that he wouldn't have to take the Captain's advice. Gary hadn't even sat down yet before she started doing her own interrogation, turning to the back door he had only taken three steps when Lena stepped between him and the door, stopping him with her hand on his chest.

"I know you didn't tell us everything that happened this morning." Seeing Jessica get up and leave the kitchen. Lena wanted to go after her, causing her to feel torn between the two of them, but needing to know how close she had come to losing Gary this morning had her standing her ground. The only man she'd ever cared about, and admitting to herself this morning after seeing the bloody spot that she was in love with him. She'd be damned if she was going to lose him now. Gary had never told her how he felt about her, but Lena wasn't giving up without a fight.

"Sheriff Daniels, the Captain's son. I tried to help him. But it was too late." Wanting to pull her to him and hold her close. Touch her flaming hair and breathe her in. Shoving his hands in his pockets, not sure, if he touched her now that he would be able to let go anytime soon.

Wrapping her arms around his waist Lena hugged him to her. "I'm sorry; I thought it might be yours. That you had gotten shot."

Lifting her chin with his finger and brushing his lips gently across hers. "I wouldn't have kept that from you, Lena. You have to know that," Wrapping his other arm around her waist, to bring

her closer. "I'll go change and check on things down at the barn, and then we have to talk about some things, Lena." He said pressing his hips against hers, so there was no mistaking what he meant.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Waves rolled in crashing on the beach, seagulls circled searching for their next meal. He did not have time for incompetent fools. The journals his father had kept hidden, not letting anyone see what he had written in them. Finding a fake panel in the wall of his father's office at home by accident, father would be proud of his son, for following in his footsteps. Reservations for tomorrow night have already been made. Wondering, maybe this time he would achieve the same heart pounding rush as the last one. The first kill had scared him. The rush from ending someone's life was unbelievable. Thinking about it made him hard, excited with anticipation. He wanted this one to be perfect, just like when his father had taken his seventh lover.

February 14, 1972. Tonight is a night for love. My sweet Maria is meeting me at the new French restaurant in Memphis. The place is perfect, very busy with discreet seating and invisible staff. Everything is planned; my body is humming with excitement, making me hard. Sweet Maria will be number seven. Hope my Rosaline, is ready and waiting for me, when I get home. The thought of pounding all my excitement and lust in to her, makes me so hard it is painful. Thought about pounding my lust into Sweet Maria, wondered if she was tight or had age loosened her. Would she fight me, or lay there. I'll decide later during dinner with my seventh lover.

Bagging up the jeans, he'd just stripped out of, and tying the bag closed, to take it with him to toss in the garbage can. Gary would never wear them again, no sense in trying to get the blood out. The apartment was sparsely furnished and clean, he didn't need much anyway, playing with the idea of fixing dinner for Lena tonight, sounded even better now to take their minds off everything for a short time. Maybe distracting that sharp mind of hers, before she

asked too many questions or figured out he was more than a horse trainer. The truth about why he was here in Daytona had almost rolled right off his tongue. Then she had slid her arms around his waist and hugged him, so he had swallowed everything but the answer she asked for. Choosing to wait and tell her after things had calmed down a bit.

Gary knew he was in love with her, and he had thought about telling her even though it made the palms of his hands sweat. Yeah, she would probably punch him. Chuckling to himself as he jogged down the steps, to his apartment above the stables, who would have thought being stupid in love could feel this great. Lena probably thought he just wanted sex. Well yeah, lots of it. Say fifty years worth and all the bells and whistles that went with being married, seeing Stevens on the back porch smoking as he walked toward the house, "Where's Lena and Jessica?"

"They're up in Jessica's room."

"Did you get a look at the shooter?"

"Just the height, bout six foot I'd say. I couldn't see any hair sticking out from under the ski mask."

"I need to ask Jessica who she's had over to her house or inside that shop." Gary hadn't gone around the house to look at the damage done by the shooter before him and Stevens had left. He wondered if Captain Daniels would let him look around the crime scene. "You need to get your things from the hotel today we're leaving early in the morning for Tampa." Glancing at the back door, "since Jessica is here with her suit case, I'd say she's planning to go to."

"Going to the races are we?" Freaking great, just what he needed, a big mobbing crowd milling around while he tried to keep an eye on Blondie.

Dragging his fingers through his windblown hair, "Yeah, Lena has one of her horses in a late race then there's a party at nine o'clock, tomorrow night, all the owners and trainers go."

"So where am I staying tonight?"

"On the couch, right here inside the house with Jessica, unless you can talk Jessica into sharing her bed with you."

"Probably better to come clean with Red, it looks like she's starting to put two and two together."

"Not yet, I plan to distract her starting now, keep her mind and body occupied with more important things." Giving Stevens a toothy grin, "That's why you're not staying on my couch." Gary said as he opened the back door. "Come on let's see what their up to, it's too quiet in here."

Strolling in to Jessica's room with two cups of coffee, she sat Jessica's cup down on the nightstand. There was papers all over the bed, it seemed the box they were in had been turned upside down and everything inside dumped out in one big heap. Dragging the biggest box over in front of the window seat, "I almost brought up beer instead of coffee."

"I can't drink beer this early in the day. It would just give me a headache. Going through some of this stuff should take our mind off this morning. At least that's what I'm hoping."

"Okay," Sitting her cup aside, and cutting the tape with a box knife. "Do you have a system yet?"

Jessica looked up at Lena rolling her eyes, making them hurt worse. "You're kidding right; I just dumped this one out on the bed. Who knows what's in here?"

Lena pulled the flaps back, "Who packed up all your parent's things?" Leaning over the top of the box, and peering in, to see what was inside. The box seemed unusually big for a packing box at least to her anyway.

"I don't really know," Jess shrugged and looked at the top paper and turned it over. It was some sort of invoice, and set it aside. "So far I've only gone through two boxes at the house. I left a message at the attorney's office for Mr. Dunham to call me back last week; he hasn't returned my call yet." Jessica said as she was glancing at what looked like another invoice of some sort, and put it in the stack with several other papers she had already looked at.

Hearing the footsteps coming up the stairs Lena closed the flaps on the box in front of her picked up her coffee and slid the box to the side with her foot, she figured if Jess wanted Gary and Stevens to know what was in the boxes she would have asked them to help. "How many boxes are there?"

Jessica shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't take a count when I moved them from storage. Guessing I would say close to two hundred. Some of them are old and the handwriting on them is different."

Dropping the subject as Gary and Stevens walked into the room. Lena took a sip of her coffee, *yep she had it bad*. Damn, her unruly body, Lena wanted to bite him on the neck. Watching Gary walk toward her, more like stalk, starting at his well-muscled thighs moving up to his *Mmmm...* hips, hard flat abs, tormenting herself. Her eyes locked on to his. Now Lena knew how her mares felt when it was breeding time and they were in heat. Her heartbeat had accelerated with each step he had taken bringing him closer to her. Felt the heat whip through her body, think of something else, think, think. God the look in his eyes, he looked like he was going to eat her alive, one big bite right there in front of everyone.

Clearing her throat, as Gary sat next to her on the window seat, almost on top of her. Do not think about it. Don't go there. He was touching her, hip to hip and thigh, to thigh. She could feel his body heat through both of their jeans. Making the muscles go lax in her thighs. Her breasts ached, and her nipples hardening calling out for his attention. Damn it, she felt like groaning. Lena was so uncomfortable in her own skin when he was near. Had to be lust, no it was more than that, no since in lying to herself anymore, the way Gary made her feel was so foreign to her, she'd thought at first it would pass, like a virus or the flu. So far no luck there, scooting over so their legs were not touching; only to have Gary follow her. Lena hissed at him, "Would you stop it?"

"No," he whispered back wrapping his arm around her shoulders, drawing her closer to his side. Kissing the sensitive skin just under her ear while he whispered to her, "You're having dinner with me tonight, Lena." Placing more, feather soft kisses behind her ear, "Alone, just the two of us." Feeling her slowly, melt against him, almost in surrender. Gary reminded himself to go slow, be gentle. When he felt like tossing her over his shoulder and taking her to his apartment now. He had images, of her under him, with her long glorious legs wrapped around his waist, sinking into her over, and over again with no barriers between them.

Stevens hadn't paid any attention to Gary and Lena when he had entered the room. For all he cared they didn't exist when Blondie was in the same room. Looking around the bedroom, he noticed the lack of personal items missing. Taking an old wooden-ladder-back chair, from against the wall and turning it around, he put it next to the side of the bed, straddling it as he sat. Seeing the heap

of papers on the bed, in front of Jessica, he figured it was some of her parent's stuff, she had mentioned earlier. Without taking his eyes off what Jessica was doing, "You two should get a room." He said.

"Go to hell, Stevens."

She put a hand to Gary's chest, to keep him from leaning forward, great chest, hard and warm. Lena wanted his lips on hers, to wrap her arms around his neck and thread her fingers through his dark wavy hair. She leaned back so his firm lips were not touching her neck anymore, her body, humming a song just for him, like an endless chant, yes, yes please. She felt deprived denying herself his touch. Giving herself a mental shake, we are not alone for god sake. What the hell was wrong with her, turning her head to look him in the eye, bad move. His eyes like storm clouds, dark, primitive. They were pulling her in.

She could feel his breath feathering across her lips, had only to lean forward slightly and then she would be in heaven. Or would it be hell? She didn't care at this point. Yes, this was what she wanted. She was done fighting it. Now was not the time, but later, yes later tonight. "Would you like something to drink?" Her voice soft and husky almost a purr, God the man stirred her up and turned her inside out.

Wanting her was going to kill him, he was sure of it. Gary could see himself in the green of her eyes that had sharpened desire heating them. No woman had ever had this kind of control over his mind and body. His mouth wasn't dry now; Gary was almost surprised he hadn't drooled on her neck. "Good idea." Taking her hand as he stood, pulling her off the window seat, in his wake. His hand tightening on hers so she couldn't pull away from him as they left the room. Now, Gary wanted her under him, against him, skin to skin.

His long stride had them down the stairs, out the kitchen and in his apartment with the door shut and locked before any portion of his brain had a chance to reengage. Leaning back against the door, with his hand still on the doorknob, he yanked Lena against him, wrapped one arm around her, "Tell me no, now, this is your last chance. Please don't say no."

Please do not say no. It was like a chant whipping through her body, begging her.

Waiting for her answer might kill him first. He knew he could make her say yes and give in to his needs. Fighting for control he relaxed his arms around her some so he wasn't crushing her. Wanting her, like he'd never wanted any other woman, he lowered his head. His eyes locked on hers. Gary's breathing was so ragged with the strain of waiting it made his voice husky. "Tell me."

CHAPTER NINE

Body on fire, Lena was waiting to spontaneously combust. *Never, have I felt anything like what was coursing through my body now*, to truly be free. She didn't want it to end, not yet. She needed to think, was he the one, could she trust him. Should she tell him he would be the first, the only. With each deep breath his scent wrapped around her beckoning to her for surrender, maybe if he would kiss her once more she would have the right answer.

He had her body pressed up against his, hip-to-hip and thigh-to-thigh. Rubbing both her palms up his chest, Oh god, what would it feel like if he didn't have his shirt on? He had great shoulders, her hands continuing up until she was threading her fingers in his hair. Dark and thick with just a hint of a wave, watching his eyes zero in on her lips. She wondered if he could hear her body humming lightly. Using the tip of her tongue she wet her lips, she could still taste him. Taking a firm hold on the back of his neck, she brought his lips the rest of the way down for another taste.

She felt torn between mind and body, if only she could shore up some of the walls around her heart, he had already broken through.

His hands were caressing the skin of her back, his lips leaving a trail of heat in their wake. Making her burn hotter his hands, branding the skin through her shirt, she brought his lips back to hers again. The feel of his heart thudding hard against her breasts, making them tighten with the need for his touch, nipples erect pressed firmly against his chest. Shifting them seeking something she didn't fully understand.

Trying to grasp the right decision, while she change the angle of the kiss his tongue seeking hers, stroking, probing, while one of his hands lifted her hips slightly pressing her to his hard erection, bringing her to her toes. "Please, I want." Not knowing she had voiced her plea, he took the kiss deeper.

Taking her by the hips, he lifted her higher. Her legs wrapped around his waist as he turned and pressed her back against the

door, molding her hips and thighs with his hands. Control, he had to get some control back. Gary wanted this to last. To take his time, savor every inch of her body. Skin, he had to touch her skin, *oh god there. Yes, yes more*. Pressing against the top junction of her long legs, rubbing himself seeking to ease the pain he was feeling. Causing her to press back, shivering with anticipation and whimper with need.

Hearing the whimper snapped what little control he had, yanking her t-shirt over her head and removing her bra, his hands cupping, firm breasts. Grazing his thumbs over taunt nipples, made her arch her back against his touch and press them firmer against his hands. Moving his lips across her jaw, down to the sensitive skin of her neck, he nipped and licked his way across her shoulder.

"Oh, God please, please," She was out of her mind. Something inside her was building threatening to tear her apart. Arching her back his lips made a searing path down to her waiting breasts, offering, ready to beg. Then his tongue flicked wetly across the left nipple. Fisting her fingers in his hair, to hold him to her, pressing her nipple into his mouth, he sucked and licked, pulling, pressing.

"Bed now must get to the bed." Gary's mind was splintering, as she pressed her whole body to his. Her nails scoring his back as they raked his shirt up and tugged, dragging it roughly over his head, causing him to stumble as she tossed it aside.

Oh god yes, her heart was beating fast and hard. Finally, skin bronzed from the sun, Lena ran her fingers through the hair on his chest to feel its soft texture with her hands, before leaning in to rub her aching nipples against his bare chest. A deep purr, rumbling up from her soul as her body demanded more. Of what Lena didn't know and didn't care as long as there was just more of him. Her body had never felt so alive; gripping the sides of his head she nipped his lower lip with her teeth, and then soothed the ach with her tongue.

"Hold on, damn it hold on." Turning, he pressed her roughly against the wall in the short hallway. Fisting his hand in her hair, he pulled her head back exposing the soft sensitive skin of her neck, drinking her in as he ravished her neck, branding her every where he touched. Using his right hand, he yanked at the top button of her jeans, and then used both hands, to shove her jeans and something lacy down as he slid his hands around to the back of

her thighs, moving up and cupping her ass. Lifting her back up he stumbled the rest of the way to his bed.

She tried to kick her jeans and panties, the rest of the way off, so she could wrap her legs around him again. Leaping, from undecided, to the aggressor Lena had to have him now, all of him, inside her. She was shivering with an uncontrollable need to be joined to this one man.

Pushing her legs back down, so he could shed his own clothes. "Let me. Get.. Off.. I want." Panting not wanting to take his lips from hers, he was already sweating with a primitive need, raging through his body unlike anything he had ever known. Gary knew he needed to gain some control. He kicked off his pants. Backing her to the side of the bed he followed her, as she lowered, taking all of his weight. Inside her, he had to be inside her. Sinking his fingers into her heat, her body arched violently off the bed as the climax ripped through her. Licking, teeth nipping their way down, more he wanted more, he wanted all of her. Hot, got she was hot and wet. Writhing and moaning under him. Gripping her by the hips, poised at the gates of heaven or hell Gary didn't know. "Look at me, wrap your legs around me. Open your eyes, Lena." He growled demanding she hear him, wanting her with him.

Opening her eyes to a slit, they locked on to his as he pressed the tip of his hard erection against her. Rubbing, pressing in a little more each time and pulling back, then he thrust forward deep causing her back to arch off the bed, she cried out at the shock of pain.

"Don't move," *Oh, god.* Her first time, holding his body still, muscles rigid and straining. *Her first,* it was like a primitive chant in his head demanding he take and possess. To thrust, move in and out of the glorious heat he was sheathed in as far as he could go joined at last.

The pain had been a shock, but why did he stop. No, no more, yes more. Tightening her legs around his waist, pulling him in deeper, as he lowered himself, kissing her, she wanted him to move. But she couldn't form the words to tell him what she wanted.

The low guttural growl, ripped from deep in his chest, as she began to move against him. Not daring to move yet, afraid he would hurt her. She was tightening around him. Squeezing him,

and had him giving in to his need. He pulled back and thrusting forward slowly at first, building tempo together, harder and deeper.

She couldn't breathe. Hot it was too hot, on fire. Burning she cried out at the force of the climax as it ripped her body apart and ripping Gary over the edge of the cliff, with her.

Collapsing on top of Lena, he knew he was still breathing. Every time Gary inhaled, he could smell her. His face was buried in her hair, tucked under her ear. Regaining some control, he lifted his self up on his elbows, to look down at her flushed face. His first clear thought, was *damn, untouched.* Her eyes were closed, and her lips were swollen from his kisses. Gary was truly afraid he had hurt her. Berating his self, *I should have known.* All of the signs had been there, he thought, gently wiping the wisps of hair from her cheek. Finding one stray tear caught in her eyelash. "Did I hurt you? Why didn't you tell me, Lena?" His throat was so dry it made his voice low and gentle, no more than a whisper.

Breathing deep, she was coming back to normal, Oh good I can hear. Both mind and body was limp as an over cooked noodle, she hadn't gotten any feeling back from the neck down yet, *worry bout it later,* Lena thought sluggishly. Nice, brain starting to function again, that's good. She felt like she was drifting, why was Gary whispering? She tried to focus on what he was saying, but it was taking a great deal of concentration. Lifting her arms so she could run her fingers through his hair again, better, she was getting some feeling back in her arms and legs. God, why had she waited so long for this? "Mmmmm..."

"Lena?" Still whispering to her, he pressed his lips at the corners of hers as he searched her face for signs of pain, though she didn't look like she was in any pain.

"Kay."

Searching her face again to make sure, he moved back to her lips, to deepen the kiss and she wound her arms around his neck. Damn he was getting hard again and he knew it was too soon for her. Ending the kiss, he drew back to look at her again. *Yep, he was a goner.* Gary thought rolling over beside her disengaging their bodies at the same time. "Lena, why didn't you tell me you'd never been with a man before?"

"Could you come back over here?" Damn it all to hell, couldn't she enjoy a little more of his totally naked body. She felt very

possessive and the nagging voice was adding her two cents in as well. *He is meant for you, for all time. Free me, drop the barrier and I will show you.* We together must protect our people at all cost. Oh, shut up already. Lena thought in disgust. She wondered vaguely how many other women had another, presence in bed with them, when they were with a man. Maybe she was just nuts. *No, you're not nuts....* Lena tuned the voice out as she felt the mattress shift with Gary's movement.

Getting up off the bed Gary scooped her up, headed to the bathroom, and stepped into the shower. Letting her legs slide down, he turned the water on, the cool water beat against his broad back until it warmed. Keeping her body pressed against him. Damn his body was getting as unruly as a horny teenage-boy. Lena had her eyes open; they were still clouded with the remains of passion, kissing her on the tip of her nose, he turned so she was under the water.

Lena couldn't get passed all the emotions whipping through her. Part of her wanted to cry or maybe scream, and the other part, well it didn't seem to be working just yet. She leaned her head back on Gary's shoulder, to let the warm water run down the front her body.

"Still waiting."

"Are you always this chatty afterward?"

"No," turning Lena around so he could see her eyes. Over the last month, Gary had learned quickly how to read her eyes. Rubbing, his soapy hands down her back, "Please tell me I didn't hurt you, if you had told me before I could have been gentler or gone slower."

Seem to be a day of firsts, for her. Falling face first in love, Sex and Man, great sex, of course she didn't have anything to compare with, which is okay with her. Watching the water run over the hairs on Gary's chest. "It didn't hurt much."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Shrugging, Lena could feel the heat in her face. "You never asked and it didn't really seem important."

Lifting her chin with a finger and kissing her swollen lips. He could see she was embarrassed because she was blushing. Yep all the signs had been there he thought one last time and decided to let it go. "Okay, want to cook me dinner?"

Seeing the teasing glint in his stormy eyes she was hoping she could draw him back to bed after the shower. Lena slid her hands up and hooked them together behind his neck, "Maybe, what's in it for me?" She could hear the hesitation in her voice. Well, duh. She had never done anything like this before.

"What is it?"

"What do you mean?" Lena frowned as she wondered what he was talking about now.

Reaching behind her Gary turned the shower off. After stepping out of the shower, he took one of the big, thick towels to wrap it around Lena and give her a quick kiss on the lips. "You've got that look you get when you're thinking."

"You do this a lot?" Lena had to keep him from digging to deeply with his questions.

"No."

Quickly drying her body off and heading back to the bedroom to search for her clothes. "I should just go back to the house."

Leaning against the doorframe, he watched Lena rush around his bedroom trying to find her clothes. "We'll go back up to the house later." Straightening from the doorway, Gary knew he had better get dressed, so if she tried to make a break for it he wasn't running across the yard buck ass naked, watching her tug her shirt on and head toward the bedroom door. Getting there before she did, Gary blocked her escape.

"Damn it Gary, I'm supposed to be helping Jess with those boxes." She waved a hand at the bed, "Not up here rolling around with you." She had to get out of here before she said or did something stupid.

Stalking toward her, *Rolling around with him*, okay that hurt. Well she needed to catch up so they were on the same page. Watching her back up with each step forward he took. He caught her by the shoulders one-step from the bed, pulled her against his chest and gently fused his mouth to hers. "Stay Lena, please stay with me."

Laying her forehead on his chest, Lena asked, "Why do you want me to stay?" Dumb question, she was in over her head. *Okay I can do this. Just a fling no strings attached.* She'd never had a fling so what the hell did she know. *Not a flin....* "Uhugh." Lena groaned.

Gary tried to lighten up by relaxing his hold on her. Maybe he was scaring her. Damn it. Good job Wellington. Taking her by the hand he pulled her behind him, he asked. "Want a beer?"

Since he was already dragging her into the kitchen, "Sure a beer sounds good."

Letting go of her hand he waved in the direction of the kitchen table, "Have a seat we need to talk."

Just hell. Raking her hair back from her face, damn man made her feel like pulling it out. "Okay," the tone of his voice didn't sound reassuring. Watching him take two beers from the frig and open them, Lena hadn't been in the apartment since he had moved in. Looking around the kitchen, it seemed bare for someone who had lived here a month or so.

White walls with no pictures, just plain bare walls. Kitchen was spotless apparently wasn't used much. The only thing new was an expensive Bunn coffee maker, didn't look like it had been used much either. Turning in the chair she could see into the living room.

The furniture was the same of course. It went with the apartment. Frowning, tapping a fingernail against the beer bottle, there was a newspaper laying on the oak coffee table that was it nothing else. No personal belongings and no clutter, nothing except for the newspaper, how was she going to be nosey, if there was nothing here to snoop through? So maybe he's an obsessive neat freak. She took a drink of her beer. He'd been eating dinner up at the house almost every night, thanks to mom's match making ideas. Oh yeah, she was on to her alright. Do not think about it, you'll just get a headache again.

"Didn't bring much when you move down here?" *Now why the hell did I say that?* She wondered taking another drink of her beer, "Never mind, it's none of my business," Lena said.

"No, I didn't bring much with me, that's part of what we need to talk about."

"Gary, you don't need to tell me your life story. I knew we would end up in bed together. Now that we've gotten it out of our system things can go back to normal no strings attached." Lena shrugged like she really, didn't care.

Still leaning against the counter he tipped the bottle to his lips watching her, since he had given her the beer, she hadn't looked

directly at him. Nope she had looked ever where but at him. Okay, obviously, she was not on the same page as he was; *I guess I'll just move her along until she's on the same page.* What she had said kinda hurt; there was this little ache in the center of his chest. "No Strings attached. Got it out of your system did ya?" Gary said, okay, so it did irk him and so what if it's not a normal guy reaction he decided, as he sat the beer aside.

Seeing him out of her peripheral vision, damn he looked good standing there. Lena nervously tapped her fingernail on the table. If he would touch her again, she wouldn't feel like jumping out of her skin. Lena stood up from the chair, pacing into the living room and back. God why was she so nervous all of a sudden. "Why are you so irritated that's what guys want isn't it?" Great now she was irritated, because he is irritated, that made a lot of damn sense.

His eyes had locked onto those long, sexy, jean-clad legs, watching her hips twitch back and forth with each long stride she took. Remembering the feel of her strong, silky legs wrapped around his waist. Bracing his hands on the counter, his fingers gripping the edge to hold himself in place. Memories of those hips moving with each thrust, *what?* Why did she stop pacing? *No, no keep pacing.* Hot! Damn she's hot. Again, come on, come on, don't stop.

"Well, damn it speak!" Lena barked, raising her voice.

"Again!" Gary growled. *Now, on the table, floor, anywhere. Just make it Now. The chant echoing louder and louder.* Moving quick Gary tossed her over his shoulder, as his long stride made the trip back to the bedroom short.

"What the hell do you think you're doing? Damn it, put me down, you idiot, ass." Hands braced on his lower back. She couldn't see for all her hair hanging down in her face.

"Nope!"

"Put me..." Sucking in a startled breath, she was free falling on to the bed, bounced twice before she could scramble to the other side of the bed. "Jerk, you idiot." Voice breathless, her heart racing as she gained her feet, braced, legs spread ready to escape. Lena shoved the hair out of her face and flicking a quick glance at the open bedroom door, then back at Gary.

"I won't let you go, Lena. You can run, but I will catch you. I'll never let you go," Body tense, ready to lung at the slightest

movement. The thought of the chase made him even hotter. With the bed between them as a big reminder of hot slick body's sliding, rubbing, her sent mixed with his still permeated the air in the bedroom. Stalking over to the open door, Gary slammed it shut, and locking it for good measure.

Her eyes snapped wide at the sound of the lock hitting home. "You can't do that." Lena yelled, her voice raising her temper heating up again. *No need to run, this is what you wanted. Join with me and I'll show you the way.* "Back off!" Lena replied out loud unsure just who she was talking to, Gary or the nagging voice in her head. Clamping her lips shut, Lena told the nag to shut the hell up.

Back against the door arms folded across his chest. Yes, the fiery goddess, Gary had first seen at the diner. Emerald eyes flashing hot and sharp, deepened with temper, her blood heating under the skin made her more vibrant. Hot red gold hair, long, mused from his hands seem to take on more color, deepen, making his body throb harder, crooking a finger for her to come to him, and watched her shake her head, no.

"We're not finished, Lena. It'll be awhile before we come close to finished." He explained.

Seeing his eyes hot on her, raking over her body like she had no clothes on, suddenly she felt dizzy and hot. Bracing a hand on the bed, her muscles quivered everywhere his eyes touched, while he slowly stalked toward her and the bed. Stopping when their bodies where lightly up against each other. His fingers skimmed lightly up her sides, closer and closer to her breasts, heavy and aching for his touch, "Please." Was that husky sound, barley a whisper, her voice?

"Please what?" Gary asked his voice just as husky, as hers.

"Touch me." If he didn't hurry up she was considering biting his shoulder. "Yes, *he is ours.*" No, go away twos company and three is a crowd so get lost, Lena thought and blocked the nagging voice out.

"I am touching you."

"More."

"More what Lena?"

Eyes heavy lidded, she placed her hands on the side of his face. Bringing his lips down and sinking in, feeling him push her jeans

down. The brush of his hand against her center had her moaning into his mouth. Lena stepped back and pulled her shirt over her head, and kick off her jeans at the same time. Pulling his shirt over his head she dropped it on the floor next to hers. "Mmmmm..." She was feeling more aggressive, more herself "Now." Running her hands down his chest to the button of his jeans, she yanked them open and pushed his jeans and his boxers down.

Picking her up, and stepping out of his jeans at the same time bracing a knee on the bed, he lowered her down and pinned her to the bed under him with his weight.

The papers Jessica was stacking in a pile made no sense to her. Why did her parents have invoices and statements from high-end department stores? They had moved around so much that Jessica had never really become familiar with any city they had lived in. Thinking back to the time she had spent in the different cities she could remember, Jessica realized they had lived no more than a year in each city they had ever moved to, why would her parents move around so much especially with a small child to care for.

Stevens had been sitting quietly watching Blondie go through the papers she had dumped on the bed. He had thought about offering to help so he had a reason for sitting in her room after Gary had dragged Lena off to his apartment. Stevens didn't really care if he had a reason or not, Blondie wasn't paying him any attention so he was trying not to disturb her and give her a reason to boot him out the door. The expressions on her face as she looked at each paper she picked up made him break his silence. "What are you looking at?" Holding out his hand hoping Blondie wouldn't invite him to leave her room.

"This is some of my parent's things, though I can't make heads or tails of it. So far all the papers in this stack are invoices and statements from the last three years my parents were alive."

"Some people keep receipts for everything they buy." Shrugging his shoulders, Stevens didn't really understand why people did it he just knew they did.

"That's not what bothers me. It's knowing, the kind of jobs my parents had while they were alive. They couldn't afford this kind of life style with those jobs." Sitting the invoice aside with the rest, and looked Stevens straight in the eye. Jessica was wondering what

her parents had done in the past that would keep them on the move from one city to the next year after year.

There was a lot of concern in the deep blue eyes. Even as he told himself, this wasn't his problem he asked, "What kind of jobs did they have?"

"My mother waited tables and did office work off and on. My father did the same as far as I can remember. They held the same kind of jobs in each city we lived in."

Stevens keep your mouth shut and do not ask any more questions. He was chanting this to himself even as his curiosity grew to the point he knew he would need more answers or there would be little sleep in his near future. Stevens loved a good mystery or a hard puzzle with little or no clues. "Would you like some help?" He was wondering if there was something in her parent's things, which would explain, why someone was trying to break into her shop.

"I couldn't ask you to help this is my problem, but thanks for offering." Jess said rifling through the rest of the papers to make sure they were like the others before placing them on top of the stack. The whole box was nothing but invoices and statements. She placed the stack of papers back in the box and sat it on the floor at the foot of her bed. Jessica picked up another box from the stack and placed it on the bed before she sat down.

After returning the chair to its spot by the foot of the bed, Stevens sat next to the box on the bed across from Jess, mimicking the way she was sitting. "I don't mind helping Jess; this will give me something to do."

"Right, not to mention there might be something in here, someone might try to break into my shop after."

"Yes, there is also that possibility. You said your parents held jobs that didn't pay well and yet you just went through a box full of invoices for items they shouldn't have been able to afford."

Raking her fingers through her hair in frustration, the memories she had blocked all these years were starting to push at her. "I know, it makes no sense to me at all." Picking up the box knife she cut the tap securing it. "Since the accident I've blocked it all out, the way we lived and were. I don't want to remember anything but the good times with my parents before the car wreck.

Stevens knew it was painful to remember the ones lost in the past. "How old were you when you lost your parents?" Sometimes

it helped to talk about the painful memories and work past them. He knew because he had his own painful memories locked away.

"Fifteen and I really don't want to talk about this." Folding the flaps of the box down she leaned over to peer inside. "Do you think Gary and Lena are coming back to the house?"

"I wouldn't count on it; Gary said he was cooking Lena dinner tonight."

"Are you cooking me dinner?" Jessica asked, reaching into the box to pull out another hand full of invoices.

"Maybe you should cook me dinner I might burn whatever I cook." Peering over the side of the box at the papers, she was holding in her hand, he tried to read it upside down. There was some sort of funny looking design at the top. The letterhead looked vaguely familiar to him, but he couldn't place it. Stevens gaze shifted to her face as he tried to read her expression.

"Stop looking at me like that. I'm not cooking for you." The paper was a memo from some corporation up north stating that the quarterly statement would be sent to her father's new address.

Placing his hand on top of the paper blocking Jessica's view, "You can help me cook then." He pushed down on the papers in her hand making her let go of them. Stevens didn't care what was in the box it could wait. Taking Jess by the hand he pulled her with him as he left the bedroom.

Jessica had noted the time as she was pulled from her room. "Help you cook, right I'll end up doing most of the work." Jessica really didn't mind, she loved to cook as much as Anna did, but she didn't see any reason to let him in on that little secret. Going to the sink to wash her hands, Jessica realized it was later than she thought.

Holding the refrigerator door open as he looked over its contents, "So what can we cook without much trouble?" Stevens asked.

"There's lasagna in the freezer, if you'll hand it to me and then take out the things for a salad we'll be set." Going to the built in double oven she set the temperature for the lasagna to bake. Jess knew her way around this kitchen as well as the one in her own house.

Opening the freezer door and spotting the box containing the frozen lasagna. Stevens sat it on the counter then returned to the

refrigerator for salad stuff. "What kind of places did you live in when you were growing up?"

"Apartments or Mobil homes, no more questions okay."

The Black rolling fog seeped through the pine trees and the undergrowth vegetation of the forest surrounding her home. The offensive smell that permeated the air giving away its presence long before the black fog could be seen visibly. Lena knew she was dreaming again only this time it was different; there was something she couldn't seem to latch on to in the back of her mind. Frustrated with her own thoughts, she snuggled deeper into her pillow and look out at the forest. There weren't any of the night time noises, insects and nocturnal animals carrying on as usual. It was as if someone has pushed the mute button. Straining to hear something, anything, she realized that even the horses were unusually quiet; every living thing around her house seemed to be holding its breath, waiting.

Frustration turned quickly to irritation at the thought of someone trespassing again to lay traps and injure more of the horses. Could it be the one who had been taunting her with prank calls and those horrible pictures in the e-mails? Lena was standing on the grass now facing the wooded area; she slowly looked around trying to search out the intruder with her mind. At the same time Lena could feel the presence of the vile darkness seeping closer to her home and family.

A small part of her mind told her this was not possible and somewhat crazy to think she could search the forest beyond her home with only her mind. Facing the paddocks and stables she mentally shrugged, it's a dream and you can do and be anything in a dream. The feeling was stronger and more threatening in that direction. A sliver of panic raced unchecked through her body, heart thudding harder and fear for the safety of all that she loved growing side by side with her anger. *Yes Dream Walker, with anger and cool control we will both be free to join. We must protect, hear me child and drop the mind block.*

Sailing the clear midnight sky was the full moon, glowing bright and strong. She felt a strange comfort standing in the middle of her yard surrounded by moonlight, the cool dew from the grass moist on her feet. Leaning her head back to gaze at the moon and star

studded sky, thinking about the vile darkness she could feel coming closer. Foreign as the thoughts and feelings were, there was also something vaguely familiar about the dark. Eyes closed wondering about the strange thoughts and the other things that had been weighing heavily on her mind. So deep in thought it took a few seconds for her to realize someone was calling her name.

A whisper on the light breeze, it sounded like her mother calling to her. Lena turned and opened her eyes expecting to see her mom standing at the door in the mudroom. Frowning at the empty doorway, Lena could still hear the whispering of her name. Hearing the concern and worry in her voice as she called out again, Lena looked around and called out to her mom. She didn't know where her mom was or where to look, calling out to her again and again, *Mom tell me where you are.* Struggling as she felt someone from behind grab her, she ran to the porch. Striking out blindly, determined to gain her freedom.

Gary couldn't figure out why the bed kept moving. Rolling over he search for oblivion again, Stevens had better go away and leave him be damn it. Couldn't Stevens see he was trying to sleep, wait that's not right, not Stevens, Lena. Comforted by the thoughts of Lena in bed next to him, Gary let himself relax and drift back to sleep. "MOM!"

Snapping upright in the bed Gary reached for his gun as the sound of Lena's scream in his ear, echoed through his brain. Where is my gun? He thought patting his self under his arms as he realized he was naked and still in bed. "Lena?" Watching, she kicked the covers off the bed and on to the floor, calling out to her mom. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her into his lap, "Lena honey wake up." Gary said as he brushed the hair out of her face and she began to struggle against him. Keeping one arm around her waist to hang on to her, leaning over he switched on the lamp next to the bed. One of her arms escaped his hold and before he could turn her around, her elbow connected with his stomach, "Ugh. Lena wake up."

Gripping her by the shoulders, he gave her a not so gentle shake to snap her out of the nightmares grip. Shaking her again, "Lena, come on babe wake up now, your having a nightmare, come on." Easing his grip on her arms her body began to relax and her eyelids started to flutter open. Frowning as he watched the fluttering stop

and her eyelids remain closed. "Lena, wake up honey open your eyes for me now," Still talking to her he smoothed her mused hair back from her face. Pressing soft kisses to the corners of her lips as he kept his eyes open waiting for her to respond to his touch, "Baby, open your eyes for me." Her eyelids opened slowly and the dark green pools focus and sharpen. "Are you awake?"

"Hmmm... I think so, unless this is a dream to." She could see the concern in his eyes as he drew back from her lips. "How did I get in your lap?" Lena asked as she wondered about the light being on.

"You were having one hell of a nightmare, do you remember?"

Lena found it hard to concentrate on anything other than the hard body surrounding her, but she tried, a little. Shaking her head she gave the thought a once over, "Nope, last thing I remember before dozing off is you kissing me. Since I'm awake again I think you should kiss me some more."

Scotting down in the bed so she was sprawled across the top of him, he searched her face one last time to make sure. "I don't know, maybe you should kiss me instead."

CHAPTER TEN

Waking up for the first time in her life, not only was she not in her own bed but there was also a man sharing that strange bed with her. Lena awakened with a moment of panic at the strange bedroom that she was in until she noticed the closed and probably still locked bedroom door. The memory of where she was and what had happen last night came flooding back. She smiled to herself and turned to look next to her. Nope, not a dream, maybe she should pinch herself just to make sure. But Lena didn't want to move and wake him.

Gary had his head buried under his pillow so the only thing she could see was the ends of his dark hair resting on his neck. Glancing at the clock on the bedside table, she groaned at the time. Forty five minutes behind schedule meant she was running late and so was the trainer. Giggling at the thought of why her and her trainer was late, she slapped a hand over her mouth before another could escape.

"What's so funny this early in the morning?" Even with his head under the pillow, her movement had brought him a wake instantly. Dragging the pillow off his head, he turned to smile down at her. For the first time in Gary's life he actually felt whole, because Lena was lying next to him. Rolling to his side with the thought of snuggling next her warm naked body, only to have his hand smacked for his effort, "Hey, what did I do?"

Snagging the sheet and wrapping it around her body she rolled to the edge of the bed and stood. "You're late for work." Lena tossed over her bare shoulder as she strolled through the bathroom door and shut it behind her.

"I have an in with the boss so it's okay if I'm a little late for work today." Baiting her knowing she had to come out of the bathroom sometime with only the sheet wrapped around her, since the clothes she had on last night were scattered all over the apartment floor from the front door to his side of the bed.

Oh, had an in with the boss did he. *Hmm...* Lena thought as she looked at herself in the mirror, she didn't look any different than she normally did, at least not that she could tell. Shrugging she opened the door to look for her clothes. Stepping back into the bedroom, yep he was still in bed, Mr. Temptation with not a stitch covering him. Raising one arched eyebrow, "Your boss may dock your pay for being late on race day."

Though she was right about it being race day the mischievous gleam in her green eyes had his body responding instantly. "The boss is late too, and I might be able to persuade her to be gentle."

Picking her shirt up off the floor, she slipped it on before tossing the sheet on the bed. "Not going to happen, things to do before we leave so get a move on. I need coffee an hour ago." Lena demanded as she located her panties and jeans. Quickly sliding both on as she heard the sheets rustle with his movement, "Where is the key to the door, I still need to shower and change Gary?"

Sitting on the edge of the bed, "Are you going to share your shower with me?" A man can always dream. Figuring the answer was a big no as he watched her roll her eyes to the ceiling. He unlocked the bedroom door and went to the kitchen to make coffee. He could hear her muttering to herself as she walked into the living room. Gary made sure he was standing in front of the door so she couldn't leave just yet. "Come kiss me good bye honey before you go off to work." He said grinning as he crossed his arms over his naked chest, wiggling his eyebrows at her.

"You are such a riot, Gary." She realized he did mean to have a kiss. Moving closer, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek, and reached for the door knob at the same time.

He wrapped his arms around her waist, and pulled her closer as she kissed him on the cheek. "I don't think that's going to hold me over till the next time. I need a real kiss Lena." Tilting his head he rubbed his lips gently across hers, nibbling at her bottom lip.

"Hmm, Okay just a little one. I have work to do." Even as she said it, Lena could feel her resolve slipping away. She was a weak woman, when his lips are within her eye sight. Ducking under his arm before she forgot herself again, "I'm done with you for now cowboy it's time to go to work." She tossed over her shoulder before pulling the door shut behind her.

Slumped down on a bale of hay next to Jessica outside Rich's stall, "Want to ride back to the hotel with me?" Lena felt good, body and mind, excited and relaxed. She was trying to think about the race, not Gary. Hot, naked; no do not think about him. Race; keep your mind on the race.

"Yeah, I'd like to shower and change before the race." Jessica watched Lena out of the corner of her eye waiting to hear what or who had put the smug look on her face. Thinking she needed to have a little chat with Mr. Gary Wellington.

"Let's go, I've already told Gary we were going."

Shit she's in love with him, well damn. Every time Lena said Gary's name it came out as a purr and her skin flushed, just enough to see it tint her skin with a rosy glow. Yes, she would have a nice little chat with Wellington. Following Lena to the rig she waited until they were on their way. "You know I've been waiting all morning Lena, are you going to tell me what's going on with you two." Seeing the smug little smile on Lena's lips Jessica knew. "My God, you had sex with him didn't you, of course you did hell you stayed the night with him?"

"Hmmm, yes several times." Thinking about that hot, hard body sliding against hers, had heat building low in her abdomen, spreading through her entire body.

"I'm still waiting Lena so spill it."

"You want details?"

"Yes, damn it. How was it?"

"Fucking Fan-tab-u-louse! I wondered why you never told me how great sex was. Had I known, I might not have waited so long."

"Damn, he was your first, Shit Lena." She was freaking glowing. "You're in love with him aren't you?"

"Not going there. Never going there," Lena frowned, shaking her head back and forth.

Signing out loud, "It's your lie, tell it how you want. I see how Gary looks at you and I'm telling you now that is a man in love. Smitten, gone, head over heels. After Stevens and I heard the kitchen door slam shut. He mumbled something about, Got it bad. At the time I didn't really understand what he was talking about. Now I have to agree with him." Jess shook her head, poor guy. "He's got it real bad."

"Okay, ease up on that love stuff, would ya." Hearing it said out loud, Lena felt like squirming in her seat.

"Details and don't leave anything out. Is he a good kisser? He does have a very sexy mouth."

Heat was starting to build and spread through her whole body just thinking about it. "Words fail to describe."

"Man, okay scale of one to ten."

"Fifteen."

"Damn!"

"Mind blowing, I kept trying to think about the reasons I shouldn't be kissing him. Then he licked my lips and his tongue slid into my mouth. Every brain cell I have slid right out my ears."

Fanning herself with her hand, "Damn, how bout the rest."

"I thought I had died the first time, body and mind exploding into millions of little sparkly pieces." Lena shifted in her seat, "Talk about something else, not Gary's body. This conversation is making me hot."

"At least someone's getting it."

Parking the rig close to the elevator in the parking garage, "We'll have to make this quick, we've got about an hour."

"That's enough time, no problem." Jess said stepping into the elevator, "Wait until Gary sees you in that dress tonight," she let out a low sexy whistle. "He's a dead man. I'm telling ya Lena, that dress will kill him for sure."

Standing outside the stall, while Gary looked over the big Stallion, Stevens glanced down the shed row to make sure no one was within hearing distance. "How did Lena take it when you told her you weren't a real thoroughbred trainer?"

"Didn't talk much."

"Man, you better come clean before much longer. She finds out she'll skin you with that hoof pick of hers."

"Right now the less she knows the better, we're keeping a close watch on both of them."

"You haven't heard from the Captain, yet."

Frowning as he smoothed the currycomb over the sleek dark coat. "No, Daniels said he should know something by Tuesday or Wednesday of next week. But I did hear from Captain Norman Dayton P.D., the one he thought that might have been done by a

copy cat, turns out it wasn't a copy cat. The East Coast Lover is up to eight now."

Stevens face darkened with anger at the thought of the killer running free. He put the thoughts aside for later. "You better tell her, Lena's not like the other women you've been seeing Gary. She's home and children, someone to grow old with."

"Quit lecturing me," Gary said checking the time. "They'll be back in about twenty minutes or so."

"I don't like them going off by themselves like that either." Stevens glanced back down the shed row, in the direction he had seen both women last.

Parking the rig in the same spot it was in when she and Jessica had left the track. Lena pulled the key from the ignition, "What do you think of Gary?"

"How do you mean?"

"I think him and Stevens are hiding something, or not telling the whole truth."

Jessica relaxed back against the seat. Lena wasn't getting out of the truck until she said whatever was on her mind. "Yeah, I got the same feeling the other day at the sheriff's office the way they responded to Captain Daniels."

"Had the same feeling," Lena said drumming her fingers on the steering wheel, yep the same feeling. "I've been thinking about it this morning. All the way down here to Tampa, why would Stevens call Gary at the farm and then Gary goes to your house where an armed intruder has already shot one person. Like that's not bad enough. What in the hell were they thinking, Damn it, they both could have been killed, like the poor deputy, Freaking idiots," Glancing over at Jess who was looking back at her with her own frown.

"I was wondering why a horse trainer would go to a gun fight, Stevens probably has a weapon, a gun or something. Have you seen Gary with a gun?"

"No, I sure haven't and why would he need a gun at the farm." Lena growled as she opened the door of the rig to get out.

They both exited the rig at the same time, boots crunching on the gravel as they made their way back to the stables. "Answers that's

what I am getting. How about you Jessica, you want some answers too don't ya?"

"Would be nice, maybe we should wait till later. Some place a little more private than the race track. Lena you're already vibrating with anger." Jess cast a worried glance at her friend. "You get really loud when you're mad like this Lena. Private would be better to skin them both." Damn, and she was in pretty good shape Jess thought to herself on a fast breath. Lena's, long quick march had her thinking some cardio exercise might be needed. Lena wasn't even winded, mad as hell, but not winded. Stepping in front of Lena, Jess stopped her just out of sight of the shed row where Gary and Stevens were. "Wait, it's been this long right, about a month. It can wait another day, Lena. At least till we get home." Jess said placing a restraining hand on Lena's arm.

"I bet they've been lying through their friggin teeth," Giving a brisk nod.

"I don't know. Take a deep breath, and calm down Lena. If you do this here everyone will talk."

Closing her eyes Lena tried to clear the red haze that blinded her when the thought of Gary lying to her and using her had entered her mind, fixated front and center, blocking out everything else. "Right, later, thank you for stopping me." Her voice was low and ice cold with rage.

Seeing the killing look still in Lena's eyes had her rethinking the situation. Shit maybe she should warn Gary, give him a fair head start or maybe not. She put her arm the rest of the way through Lena's arm, to keep Lena by her side, "Let's go see how my man Rich is doing."

"Yes, let's do that," Feeling Jess's grip tighten on her arm, she said "You can let go of my arm now."

"Not just yet." Maybe she should yell run, Jess thought chuckling to herself, idiot men. Jessica was trying to keeping the pace slow and easy, hoping to calm Lena a little more. "Think about the Dress." Anything was better than Lena thinking about Gary and Stevens. What little hope Jess had died a quick death as Stevens stepped into their path followed by Gary coming out of the stall. Tightening her hold on Lena's arm, not that she could hold Lena back for long, maybe she should yell run after all. Wincing at the

smile, spreading across Gary and Stevens face, Jessica shook her head and tried to warn them off.

Gary sat the grooming box down by the stall door as he looked up at Jessica shaking her head, then at Lena. Shit, Lena looked ready to kill. He wiped the smile off his face when Jessica shook her head no again. Raising a sardonic brow he tucked his thumbs in his pockets. Even though they were still a good thirty feet away the look Lena was shooting him and Stevens with, would no doubt, make a sane person running for cover. "Stevens."

He had taken one-step toward Jess and Lena before he saw the look in Lena's eyes and Blondie shaking her head. Stevens pivoted on his heel and shot a hot told ya so glare at Gary. "She knows, good buddy. From the killing look on her face I'd say she's not too happy."

"Shut up, Stevens," Taking his thumbs out of his pockets, leaving his arms loose at his sides. Gary didn't think Lena would swing at him, but he was not going to be caught off guard either. Watching her shake Jessica off like she was a pesky little fly, she swaggered closer. Her hands curled into fists reminding him of a gun fighter. *Yep, she might just swing after all.* Keeping his voice low and firm he said her name. "Lena."

The red haze was closing in and shutting everything else out. Her throat so tight with suppressed anger caused her to hiss, "Bastard."

Okay, now was definitely not the time to be, turned on. But hey, he was rock hard; Gary slapped a logging chain on the dark lusty beast raging in his veins. "What happen?" Keeping his voice low when he wanted to yell was trying his limited supply of patients, but he didn't risk taking a look around to see if anyone was watching, he knew she might deck him. Then where would he be. God what a woman, he wanted to kiss her, now, right in front of everyone. Masochistic might be skimming the truth some. Gary had never been into pain or violence as a turn on, but she had sunk her teeth into his shoulder last night and obliterated his control. She was toe to toe, with him now, less than an inch between their lips.

Thoughts of him lying or using her made her chest hurt, fueling the hot anger. "Who are you? Did you think I wouldn't question why you went to a gun fight, a fucking gun fight for god sake?" Hissing at him, Oh she wanted scream all right. Not here, not in

front of the others, she poked Gary hard, dead center of his broad, hard chest with her finger drilling home each question. Turning her anger on Stevens she jabbed him with the same finger. "Did you give him a gun?" Swinging back to Gary, "What were you going to do offer to clean the tread in his shoes with your hoof pick?"

Gary took a step back in self-preservation when she came at him again rubbing his chest where she had drilled her finger into the bone. Taking another step back as she advanced, God, what a woman he thought, putting both hands up in surrender, "It wasn't like that Lena, I promise. Let me explain."

Lena looked from Gary to Stevens. "Drop dead, your both fucking fired so get lost." She said turning on her heel and stalking off, to the end of the barn and round the corner.

Grabbing Gary's arm as he started to follow Lena "Let her cool off Gary. Don't talk to her right now, maybe tomorrow." Searching both their faces, she knew Gary was about to shake her off.

"Listen, I've known Lena most my life. You try to talk to her now it will just make it worse. Don't leave, just stay out of her way, till she cools off some." She stepped back, and let her hand drop to her side. "Did both of you lie?" Directing her question at Gary, "Of course you did. I'll tell you this," casting a glance over her shoulder. Turning back, "She's figured that much out and it set her off. Lena may not get passed you lying to her. She truly hates liars, whatever the reason, it doesn't matter to her."

"We'll stick around down here with Rich."

"Okay, I'll get her up to her owner's box. See you in the winner's circle."

Gary shoved all ten of his fingers through his hair waiting until Jessica was around the corner of the barn. "Stay with them and don't let them out of your sight, Stevens."

Tucking his thumbs in his back pockets, Stevens watched Jess walk away, "Hate to say it good buddy, but I told you so, on that one."

"Yeah, I meant to tell her last night. I got distracted damn it." Gary hoped Lena would listen when she calmed down. She might fire him but he wasn't leaving and he wouldn't compromise on that issue.

"You think someone will try to get to them here, with this big of a crowd?" Stevens gazed at the people milling around the barns, coming, and going.

"The crowd is why I want you to stay with them, to many damn people here wondering around."

"Okay, see ya after the race." Stevens said before heading off to follow Lena and Jessica.

At the sound of the bell, the starting gates sprang open. Watching through her binoculars, drawing in a sharp gasp as thirteen sleek bodies lunged out of the gates, legs long and spindly reaching, muscles bunching, "Oh, god. He's taking the front, right out of the gate." Unaware she had spoken her thoughts. "That's it hold him with the pack," first turn, "No, no not the rail. He hates the rail. Damn it." Second turn, Lena was standing now as the adrenaline, surged through her veins. That's it baby come home to mama.

"NOW, turn him lose." She said, watching the jockey, trying to see how Rich was responding to him as they shot out of the turn for the last stretch. Here comes number ten, watch it he's sliding up beside you, Damn it, turn him loose Alex. Switching back to Rich's head, "He's rolling; he's rolling over the bit." Glancing back to the jockey who was struggling to hold Rich back and number ten moving up. "Damn it, quite messing around Alex," Twelve lengths to the finish line. Seeing Rich's, powerful body bunch, then stretch out fully as the jockey gave him his head on the stride rocketing him out of the pack. Number ten was no match for his long, powerful strides, "Not too far out don't give it all away, idiot."

"Holy cow Lena, he's two lengths ahead of the field." Jessica said keeping her voice low, since she was close to Lena's shoulder.

Lena's breath gushed out, she hadn't been aware of holding it in, Rich crossed the finish line, followed by the other twelve horses. "Yes!" Grabbing Jess Lena gave her a big victory hug.

"Let's go kiss the winner in the winner's circle" Jess said wrapping her arm around Lena's waist, as they left the box.

"Did you see that idiot holding Rich back?" Lena asked, getting mad all over again. "Maybe I'll smack him later to, knock all their heads together, three birds with one stone. It almost looked like he was going to throw the race."

“Yeah, I saw him. Rich was fighting him the whole way.”
“Bastards, the whole lot.”

Walking into the winners circle at the same time Gary and Stevens did. Not the place, keep your cool. Smile like life is great. Walking up to Rich, Lena shot a frozen smile at the jockey that said, your dead meat buddy. She stepped back for the picture, feeling Rich’s heavy breath on her arm, right before he nudged her with his nose, looking for his due praise. Placing her hand on his sweaty cheek, and looking him in the eye, “Yeah, that’s my boy, Great job buddy.” Lena said just as the camera flashed. Moving back with Jess, Gary took the reins and saddle after the jockey dismounted.

“Meet you back at the barn.”

Following them out of the winners circle, irked all over again, knowing Gary would see to Rich being cooled down, personally. Muttering to herself “He treats my horses like freaking royalty and he lies to me.”

“Maybe he has a good reason for not telling you the truth.”
Scanning the people milling around as they headed back to the barn, “Haven’t seen Stevens, have you?”

“Yes he was standing next to the other liar.”

“Are you going to let them explain, why they lied? I’d really like to know myself.”

“I guess you think I should listen to what they have to say. It will not matter, Jessica. I’m not changing my mind on this. The point is they lied, period.” Lena snapped stopping in her tracks at the end of the barn waiting for Jessica to finish.

“Just listen to what they have to say,” putting her hand up, before Lena could say no. “I think they maybe cops or something. If they were, it would explain why they went after the person that shot Jack. Maybe they couldn’t tell us because they’re under cover or something.”

“Fine, I’ll listen, and then they can pack up and leave.”

“I think you should ask them to stay.”

“What, are you out of your mind? No absolutely not, not going to happen,” Shaking her head Lena threw both hands up in the air, she couldn’t believe Jess wanted her to ask them to stay.

“With everything that’s been happening, I feel safer with them around. And if you won’t let them stay at the farm, then I’ll ask them to stay at my house.” Jessica threatened, crossing her arms and sticking her chin out. “Think about it, before you decide and quite being so stubborn.”

“I’m not being stubborn.”

“Unbending!”

Seeing the stubborn look in Jessica’s eyes, she would do it to and Jessica going home being the last thing Lena wanted, after what had happen even with Gary and Stevens, staying with her. Giving a frustrated huff, “Fine, I’ll listen and they can stay. But you’re staying at the house to until they catch whoever killed Jack and the deputy.” Lena demanded, in a final tone as she stepped around Jess and headed for the stall.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Arriving back at the hotel, Lena stalked toward the bank of elevators, not caring if Jessica and the baboons were following. They had just enough time to get ready for the party, because she had spent too much time at the track looking for that worthless freaking Jockey of hers. Lost in her own black thoughts, she pushed the elevator call button several times in rapid succession, trying to hurry it along. Muttering, "I don't have time for this, damn it." Hearing the ding as the doors slid open, "Finally."

Nudging Jessica with his arm, they followed Lena into the elevator, keeping his voice low bending closer to her ear, inhaling the smell of her hair. "Who made her mad this time?" Stevens asked.

"The Jockey, Alex, he disappeared right after the race."

"Aahh..." Stevens said. That was who she had been looking for the last hour. Nodding his understanding at Blondie he settled at the back of the elevator. Wondering what the poor fool had done to earn the black looks on Reds face. Shaking his head, Stevens was happy he wasn't the target she would be aiming her hot anger at.

Jessica waved her hand so they would keep walking; she stopped behind Lena at their door. "Get ready we've only got an hour or so till the party."

"Don't leave the room until we come and get you." Gary said as he walked past them to the room next to theirs. His tone hard, leaving no room for an argument.

Hearing the door to their room open, Jessica shoved Lena forward, smiling over her shoulder at Stevens. "Okay, we won't." She said and shut it in his face, before Lena could say anything. Jess leaned back against the door thinking she was not cut out for this referee business. Sighing to herself, she wondered what in the hell was going on, "Quit pacing and tell me what's going on, why are you so mad at Alex?"

"Showers first then I'll tell you while we get dressed."

"Okay, I'll shower first, have a glass of wine and try to relax some."

Turning toward the mini bar, great idea Drink first, maim the help second. Passing up the bottle of wine for two fingers of scotch instead, Lena knocked back the liquor, feeling the heat spread through her system. Probably not a good idea mixing her anger with liquor, shrugging to herself it's too late to worry about it now and poured another two fingers, before recapping the bottle. Taking the glass over to the table she dropped down in the chair.

Okay, taking another sip from her glass, Lena you need to slow down and think this through. Alex almost threw the race, *why would he do that*. He went back to the dressing room in a hurry, instead of hanging around like he usually does until dinner, why. Although, the other jockeys seemed surprised when she had shown up at their dressing room, but a couple of them were very chatty, happy to impart with some of the answers she needed. He didn't take the time to shower, he had just tossed on his clothes and left with some big tall guy, they couldn't tell what the man looked like because someone had turned out the light in the hallway, right outside the dressing room door.

When she had left the dressing room, it had taken her several minutes, to find the light switch in the darkened hallway, and sure as shit someone had flip the switch off. Slimy little weasel was up to no good that's for sure. Hearing the shower shut off, Lena left her glass on the table and gathered her things to take with her into the bathroom.

"All yours Lena," Moving over to the vanity next to the bathroom door, Jess plugged in the blow drier. "Stop frowning, wrinkles will not look good with your dress."

"Right no wrinkles." Lena growled stalking into bathroom and slammed the door. So she was being a bitch, she had a lot of good reasons, that should count for something. Stepping under the shower spray, muttering to her-self, "Life as I know it is going to hell, big reason. Stop that Lena, it sounded almost like a whine and your no whiner." Think about the dress. A killer dress and kiss ass stilettos to match. Rinsing quickly and shutting off the water. Wrapping a towel around her long hair think positive thoughts, "I'm going to a party with alcoholic drinks," that is positive and Killer dress yep very positive. Mmmmm... sounds like torture for

some. Slipping on the little lace and satin bit of underwear she tucked the edge of the towel wrapped around her in to hold it in place. Lena opened the bathroom door to see Jessica turning in front of the mirror wearing her dress. "Damn, YOU'RE HOT!"

"Damn Skippy it is, I feel hot as hell wearing it. Hurry put yours on so I can see."

"I need to dry my hair first."

"Hurry up then, and leave your hair down."

Turning back to the mirror and vanity, she removed the towel from her head. "Awfully bossy tonight aren't you." Bending she flipped her hair down, and used the blow-drier and brush to tame her wild hair some, finishing up with a dab of gel to hold the curls in place, unwrapping the towel from her body she laid it on the counter as she looked at the dress, "How do you get in it?"

"Slides on and off here I'll help you." After the dress was on, Jessica turned her to the mirror. "The colors perfect."

"Look, I have cleavage and hips." Turning to see the rest of herself in the mirror, "You're right, I feel hot in this dress. I'm turning myself on looking at me." Stepping into skyscraper stilettos and adding another four inches to her height before gliding over in front of the full-length mirror for the full effect. Smoothing her palms over her slim waist, checking the snugness of the strapless top covering her breasts "You're sure this thing will stay up."

"Oh, yeah."

Lena looked at Jessica in the mirror, and smiled back at her. Jessica had that lush, hourglass figure. Not being a skinny rail herself, the dress did display her body like a neon billboard. Going back to the vanity to finish her makeup, she asked. "Did the phone ring while I was in the shower?"

"Uh, yes Stevens called over said they'll be here in a few."

Slipping the door card and a few other items into her little evening bag the thought of Gary seeing her in this dress sent a nervous thrill up her spine. Walking over to the table for one last sip of scotch, "I'm ready for some loud music and dancing to take my mind off things for awhile." Hearing a knock at the door, Lena slid her arm through Jessica's and opened the door. "Time to rock the boat." Gliding out the door she pulled it closed behind them, arm in arm. Leaving the men to follow, Lena smiled wickedly to Jessica as they both heard the low sexy whistle and a sharp in

drawn breath behind them. Two steps from the elevator, the door slid silently open, empty and waiting. Moving to the back, to stand behind Gary and Stevens, the ride to the lobby floor was a silent one.

Exiting the elevator on the lobby floor, Gary stepped aside to let Lena and Jessica by. Glaring at the men standing around staring at the half naked bodies in front of him, since Stevens had lost the draw to follow he was walking in front of them. Gary didn't know whether to wrap his jacket around Lena's bare shoulders or throttle her first. He might just have to shoot someone at the party, and that thought did cheer him up some. "The Limo is waiting out front." Gary said watching the door attendant's eyes nearly pop out of his head, he was taking it as a sign of things to come before the night was over.

"Lovely." Lena's voice was glacial in the warm humid air as they walked through the doors.

Lowering her voice as they walked up to the limo, "Be nice, there's more than one way to skin a cat." Jessica took her arm from Lena's before looking at Stevens as he slide into the Limo. Smoothing her hands down her sides, just below her breasts to the flare of her hip, she wiggled a little, to make sure her dress was in place. At the sound of the low guttural growl coming from inside the limo, Jessica batted her big baby blues at Lena, in a told you so way before sliding in next to Stevens.

Gary took Lena by the elbow, she lowered her self in and he slid in after her scooting closer, pressing against her hip and thigh. Gary had seen the slinky material hike up another half inch as she sat down. Her sent, dark, hot, mysterious, had the beast in him howling with lust. Sitting close, feeling the heat pumping off her in waves had him breaking out in a sweat his body began to throb.

She still hadn't even looked in his direction. Definitely becoming masochistic and Gary was putting the blame right at Lena's pretty painted toenails. It would be better for her he was sure, if he weren't enjoying it so much. She's trying to kill him, slowly, and very painfully. But kill him nonetheless. He turned to look at her profile, do not look down; do not look at those legs. Inhaling deep, he wondered at the texture of the back of her knees. What would they taste like? What did she have on under the dress? Would she

bite him again, if he kissed her now? Each thought, sent a dark primitive thrill whipping through his body.

“Get your nose out of my hair,” Trapped between Jess and Gary so she had no room to move over. God she was hot and flushed, good thing it was dark inside the limo. Trying to concentrate on the city going by and failing miserably, what happen to her discipline and self-control? One night with the man and hello lusty-wanton-nymphomaniac, Lena could feel his breath feather across her neck and it was driving her out of her mind. She sent up a small thank you prayer, at the sight of the club’s building.

Opening the door his self, not waiting for the door attendant, Gary extended his hand to help Lena out of the limo. The contact of her skin against his, deepened the gray of his eye, to nearly black. Letting go of her hand took every bit of control he had. Gary helped Jessica from the limo, before placing his hand in a very possessive move at the small of Lena’s back. Feeling the material slid against her skin under his hand, made his body harden to the point of being in serious pain. He prayed he lived through it to peel the dress off her later. “Don’t leave my side.”

“And if I do?” Still looking straight ahead, knowing if she locked eyes with him. He would see how much she wanted him.

“I’m not playing around Lena.”

“I’ll be dancing and mingling.” Showing the Invitation, to the guard inside as they moved forward with the crowd, toward the low driving beat of bass, coming from the back of the club. Giving the music all of her attention, she tried to block out Gary, and the feel of his hand on her back. The crowd in front of them thinned out. Letting the music seep into her body soothing her soul and the dancer she had once dreamed of being.

Smiling at the people Lena had known would be here and a few she had been introduced to that were new to the business they made their way to the table. Around the tables were several people she had known for years, mingling and talking shop. Debating with herself if she should introduce Gary to the others or would it be rude if she choose to ignore his presence. This would be hard to do since several of the women walking by were eyeing him like vultures at a buffet.

Gary had never been to a party like this before, where everyone was decked out to the hilt in designer best and real stones. He

didn’t have to ask Lena if she would like to sit, as soon as they made it to the table she had stepped away from his hand, to stand at the edge of the dance floor. “Would you like a glass of wine or something stronger?” Gary asked, standing next to her.

She wasn’t ready to talk to Gary for any reason. Lena elbowed Jessica standing on the other side of her to answer while she watched the people swaying slowly to the slow music. “Two glasses of wine would be great Gary thanks.” Jessica said flashing him one of her high wattage smiles, she saved for flirting. Knowing Jessica, it was a dig, at her for not talking to Gary.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Andrea Wilson, tall, blonde, 52 and embarrassingly rich, glided up to the maître d' and announced herself. She was bouncing on the inside; she was so excited about having dinner in such an elegant establishment. Following the very formal man to the table, her eyes lit up at the site of her new lover. Sliding into the seat across from him, he was such a gentleman standing as she approached the table and waiting for her to be seated. She was so lucky to have found him. The first years after her husband had died had been heart wrenching, thankfully she had the best of friends and family to keep her moving along, urging her to live her life. Had anyone asked her three months ago if she would ever have another man or significant other in her life. The answer would have been no.

The thought of dating after being married for 35 years to the same man would have been terrifying. Then she had met Mr. Hamilton through a friend of a friend. Such a dear man, he was very carrying and good-looking. Color stated her cheeks lightly as he lifted her hand to his lips and brushed them across the inside of her wrist. A little breathless she said, "Hamilton darling it's so good to see you"

His voice low and husky just the way he knew women liked it, "Andrea my love I've missed you." Hamilton poured her a glass of champagne, he had already requested from the waiter.

"You did, why Hamilton I've missed you too."

"I have not ordered from the menu yet, if you'd like, I can signal the waiter."

"Heavens no, I'm too nervous to eat anything just yet." She had never done anything like this before. She took a sip of her champagne to ease her dry throat. "Actually, I was wondering if you would like to come back to my room with me. I'm staying at the Gulf side spa and resort."

"Andrea my love, I would love to accompany you to your room." Signaling the waiter to bring the bill he could not believe how fast things were moving. She was making it so easy to fulfill his quest. *She is the perfect match.* Father will be very proud.

At the edge of the dance floor, Lena sipped her wine. She couldn't dance in this dress, couple of shimmies of the hip and hello ladies. Lena whispered to Jess standing next to her. "Are you sure the dress will stay up?"

The sultry laugh coming from Jess had several men around them turning to look. "Yes, I promise it will stay up."

Watching as the song ended and the dancers began to leave the dance floor, hearing Jess gasp in excitement, as the first bars of the Tango started, Lena didn't even look as she told Jessica absolutely not. "NO!"

"God, yes, don't you waste that dress Lena. It's perfect for the tango"

She hissed at Jess "Ssshhh, not so loud I don't want them to hear you."

"Why not maybe I should just tell Gary?"

"Do not. I'm warning you Jess." Seeing the smirking grin on Jess's face Gary took her by the elbow leading her not so gently on to the dance floor. She shot a glare of the retribution to come later over her shoulder as the sultry rhythm and beat called to Lena's soul. Throwing caution to the wind, her muscles responded to the heated passion the dance demanded. Locking eyes for the first time that night she yanked her elbow from his grasp, voice husky, demand, "Brace yourself!" Lena turned in rejection, casting a sultry look over her shoulder, "Do you dance Bad boy."

Spinning her around Gary yanked her against him, eyes locked. Body molded to body. Dipping her back lightly Gary brushed his lips up the arch of her neck as he lifted her. Turning, sweeping, finally he had his hands on her. Neither noticed the other dancers had moved back to give them room as they danced from one end of the floor to the other. Each dip, his lips were more demanding. Each turn his hands more possessive. Promising explosive passion he sealed his lips to hers in victory as the song ended, losing his self in the heat of her. His breathing was ragged, not from the dance, but a raging desire to have her now. Tearing his lips from

hers, he lifted her upright. Feeling her hands still gripping his hair on each side of his head, "Yes I dance, Mother insisted." He whispered close to her ear.

Giving what she hoped was a brisk nod she released his hair. Lena didn't dare speak just yet. Trying to catch her breath, she could feel the weight of his arm around her waist, as he led her from the dance floor. Lena took her glass of wine from Jessica, "Fan-tab-u-louse!" Her head still lightly spinning, from Gary's touch, check. Snorting to herself, "God bless his mother."

"Why do you say that?"

"Hmmm...His mother insisted he learn to dance." Clinking, her glass to Jessica's "God bless her."

Raising her glass to take a sip, Jess lowered it before the glass reached her lips, to chat with Lena. "The temperature in here spiked thirty degrees hotter when you went out on that dance floor. Poor Stevens almost dropped dead at the sight of you two out there." Jess said while fanning her face with her free hand. "Hell, I thought the both of you were gonna rip each other's clothes off and do it right there on the dance floor, in front of God and everybody."

"You didn't dance?"

"Oh, yeah Stevens grabbed my hand and drug me out there. Seriously, excellent moves Mmmm... which only made me hotter, thank you." Lena raised both eyebrows as Stevens took the glass out of Jessica's hand and sat it on the table beside them.

"Here's a slow one Blondie, come on." Knowing the slow song would give him the chance to get closer to her.

"Didn't want to dance, having a conversation here." Jess said as she was towed back out on the dance floor.

Stevens tilted his head in the direction they had come from, "They need to talk."

Glancing over at Lena and Gary, Gary drew Lena closer to him. Their eyes were locked and totally focused on each other while they were swaying with the slow music. "Yes, they do. The question is will it matter in the end."

"Yeah it'll matter, he won't let her go."

"She may not give him a choice."

Great dancer, maybe she should hear why he lied to her and Jessica. Maybe he had a good reason to lie. That was crazy; there was never a good reason to lie and then to keep lying. No, no reason could be good enough. She would enjoy her time with the liar tonight nothing serious, drinks, dancing and a good time.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"Cost more than that, and what would I buy with a penny anyway?"

"Okay, name your price, we'll negotiate from there."

"Hmmm..." She traced the collar of his suit and played the tips of her fingers through his hair, "Honesty in the Absolute form."

"Not here, at the hotel later, it's a deal."

"Yeah, Okay." Letting out a slow breath as his lips brushed lightly across hers, lingering as the song faded to an end.

"When you're ready to head back to the hotel, let me know."

Reaching to pick up a glass of wine, Lena frowned, not remembering exactly which one was hers. Her and Jess where drinking the same thing so did it really matter. Shrugging to herself, they had shared drinks before. Taking a long sip she watched as more dancers went to dance, tapping her foot to the two-step song.

Hearing a slow song start to play, "Drink up so we can dance again." Gary said

Swallowing the last of the wine in the glass, Lena sat the glass aside as Gary took her hand and pulled her back out on to the dance floor. "Like to dance, do you."

"With you, yes."

"You could dance with other women."

"No thanks."

Licking the corner of her mouth with the tip of her tongue, it tasted kinda tart, a mixture of wine and Gary. "Awfully short sighted of you don't you think?"

"How so?"

Jeez, the man made her dizzy, shaking her head, trying to reorient her mind. "What?"

"How so?" Gary asked again as he smiled down at her up turned face.

"How so, What?" Damn room would quit spinning around she could focus.

"How am I being short sighted?" Like slow motion, he watched as the color drained from Lena's face, and her eyelashes fluttering closed. "Lena?"

"I... I think... No not here. Not again." Lena could feel herself being sucked into the black void.

Scooping her up by the back of the knees, she had nearly slid through his arms like water. Quickly, striding from the dance floor with Lena cradled against his chest, toward Stevens. "Time to go, now, something's wrong with Lena." Gary's voice was hard from the panic that was gripping him.

Seeing Lena limp and lifeless in Gary's arms, "What happened to Lena, is she okay?" Jessica asked.

"She passed out, fainted, hell I don't know." Pure unadulterated fear was skating up and down his spine, think, think. The fear and panic freezing his mind halted any form of coherent thought.

Stevens had never seen Gary like this. He checked Lena's pulse, it was there, faint but there, "Jessica, call 911, Now." Turning to the people who were starting to crowd around them. "Move back people; Gary, put her down here on the floor, on the carpet Gary." Watching Gary stare at Lena's pale face while he was frozen with fear and panic. With a sharp demanding voice, "Wellington put her down here." Stevens demanded.

Jerking to attention Gary gently laid Lena's lifeless body down on the carpet. He watched as Stevens checked Lena's pulse again barely hearing Jessica's panicky voice beside him.

"An ambulance is on the way, what happened Gary?" Jessica's stomach was one big knot of panic as she looked at Gary and saw the raw fear in his eyes.

Gary scrubbed his face with both hands, this didn't make any sense to him, damn it. She had one glass of wine. "Nothing, Lena finished her wine and we went out on the dance floor."

Stevens didn't to look up, but kept his voice low, "Blondie?"

Kneeling on the floor next to Stevens, running her hand over Lena's hair, "What, is she going to be okay?"

"I hope so. I need you to get the wine glasses off the table, and hang on to them." Stevens said.

"Why?"

"Just do it before someone clears the table." Stevens decided to do it his self. He turned and grabbed both wine glasses by the stem

just as a waiter was reaching for them. "Hang on to these, and don't spill the contents." He said handing them to her.

"But why?" Jess asked looking down in to both glasses, "I don't want any more wine, Stevens."

Timing Lena's heart rate as he heard someone say the paramedics had arrived, about damn time to. "Don't drink anything from those glasses, Jess."

Seeing the heated look of concern in his eyes, Jess didn't understand what was going on. "I don't understand."

"Drugs, there might be drugs in the wine Jessica, so do not drink from the glasses."

The thought of some son-of-a bitch drugging Lena, made the panicky fog clear from Gary's mind fast and snapped things back into focus.

The big burly paramedic knelt down beside Lena, working fast. Asking rapid-fire questions what happen? How long ago? Did she ingest anything?

He gave quick short answers as the paramedics loaded Lena on to the gurney, following them to the door. "I'm riding with them." Gary said ready for anyone wanting to tell him differently. He was staring down into Lena's face as he held her hand trying to will her to wake up and tell him she was okay.

"Take these with you." Stevens said handing the glasses to Gary. Wrapping a firm arm around Jessica's waist, he pulled her close to his side and followed them out in Gary's wake. "We'll meet you at the hospital with the rig Gary. Come on Blondie, it's time to shake a leg."

Fear clogged her throat and made her eyes burn with unshed tears. A sob escaped between her lips. "Not funny, why did you give Gary the glasses to take with him?"

"The lab at the hospital can run trace analysis on the contents, to find out if Lena was drugged or poisoned and if so they'll know what she was poisoned with."

"Poisoned, you really think she was poisoned." Jessica asked. Her stomach was churning, making her feel nauseous. She covered her mouth with her hand as another sob escaped.

Casting a suspicious glance at Jessica, he followed the ambulance out of the parking lot; he could see one of the paramedics talking on the radio with someone at the other end letting them know what

was coming in. They were running hot with the lights flashing and siren screaming as they speed toward Tampa bay Regional hospital. Nothing had ever made him as nervous as a woman crying. It was understandable, but it made him nervous just the same. "Don't cry, Please don't cry. We're almost there Blondie."

"She has to be okay, I can't lose her to," On the sharp inhale of a ragged breath, "Oh my god! I need to call mom, she'll be upset oh, no, no, no. What am I going to tell her?" Jess wrapped her arms around her waist and rocked back and forth in her seat.

"I'll call her, Jess." Making his voice firm, but still gentle, "Calm down, you'll be no good to Lena if you fall apart. Take some deep breathes." Where in the hell was this hospital. "Ah, here we are." He parked the rig crooked, taking up two spaces in the visitor parking. "Let's go!"

A lab tech, short scary looking woman of undeterminable age, had already came and taken the glasses away. Nothing left to do but wait; since he was not next of kin, yet. No one would tell him anything anyway. Pacing from one end of the dreary looking emergency waiting room to the other his hands shoved deep in his pockets. He tried to keep his mind blank for a few minutes. Before letting the information in and replaying things in his mind. The sound of heels clicking rapidly on the tile floor reached him, just before Jessica came around the corner with Stevens at her side.

"Where is she? Is she okay? Have you talked to the doctor?" Jessica's breathe was heaving in and out, her voice quivering with fear.

"Their working on her now and the lab has the glasses. You'll need to give them her information Jessica. I've already told them you were on the way here."

Seeing Jessica rub her arms and shiver, Stevens slipped his jacket over her shoulders. "It hasn't been that long; we pulled in right behind you." He didn't like the lack of color in Jessica's face or the fact that she had started shivering uncontrollably before they had gotten to the ER. "I'll get us some coffee."

"Okay, I could use something hot."

Leading Jessica over to a chair and sitting her down in it. "Stay here and don't get up from this chair."

The setting for his seventh victim was perfect. The lady herself was perfection beginning to end. Father will be proud of his son. Arranging his lover just so on the bed dressed in one of the gifts he had given her, a white satin robe. He had taken longer this time drawing out the passion, anticipation, heightening his senses. Watching her green eyes fill with uncertainty, then knowledge as he spoke, "How now, my love? Why is your cheek so pale? How chance the roses there do fade so fast?" Bloom into panic and fear, watching as she takes her last lovely breath, eyes fading, glazed and lifeless.

Placing the unopened red-rose, with no thorns just so, nothing would mar his work. Yes, father will be proud of his son following, in his footsteps. He touched her pale cheek one last time, before leaving to disappear into the night.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The longest night of his life, had anyone ever asked him what the longest night of his life was or what it was like? Gary's answer would have fallen very short of the truth. One does not know the truth of this until they themselves have experienced it. Waiting and Praying. Listening, to the endless beeping of machines and suffering through the heart stopping panic, when the beep turns to a screeching high-pitched alarm followed by nurses and doctors running down the hallway shouting orders, working frantically on the patient.

After the doctor admitted Lena to ICU, they were given two minutes with her before nurse Ratchet had booted them-out. The doctor on call had given them a brief run down, stomach pumped, some sort of drug found in the contents and flat line was all he could remember the doctor saying. Gary had been holding his own until the flat line part. He had nearly lost her, in the quick blink of an eye.

Standing at the window, Gary stared at the horizon and watched the sunrise turning the clouds pink, red and orange. He couldn't sit and sleeping was out of the question until he was by Lena's side. Two hours to go until visiting hours started. Glancing over at Jessica to make sure she was still asleep. Her head resting on Stevens lap. She had finally cried herself to sleep not long ago. Every now and then, her breath would shudder from the hard racking sobs.

Patience had never been Gary's strong suit. What little he did have was gone especially after it was confirmed that someone had tried to murder Lena. Turning from the window to pace some more, the police report had been taken care of a few hours ago. The wine glasses were taken to Tampa PD lab for their own analysis. Hearing the soft shuffle of shoes on the tile floor he looked over as a nurse stopped in the doorway, she looked like she hadn't seen the back of her eyelids in quite some time too. The

squeaky voice of the nurse standing in the doorway looking harassed was startling in its self. "Mr. Wellington. Is there a Mr. Wellington in here?"

"Lena, is she okay? What happen?" He asked, ice cold fear clawed at him making him panic at the urgency in her squeaky voice.

"Take it your Mr. Wellington?" Her whole body seemed to shift with the hurmph she gave.

"Yes. Yes, I'm.. That's me. What happened, is she okay?" If she didn't reassure him within the next heart beat, Gary was going to pick her up and shake her like a rag doll.

"Come with me please, quickly now."

Barging through the double doors on the heels of the half pint nurse passing curtain after curtain that was pulled closed. Nearing an open curtain ahead of them, a doctor came out. Drawing closer Gary could finally understand why the nurse had come for him. Stepping to the open curtain, he let out the breath he had been holding. Sitting in the middle of the stark white sheets, an IV taped to one hand and her hospital gown draping off one creamy white shoulder, flaming hair mused to the point of sticking up and out like a livid raging woman on fire. God! She's the most beautiful thing in the world. Gary couldn't stop the smile from spreading across his face. Here was his sunrise, livid but here. Alive!

Crooking a finger at Gary to come closer, Lena's brows slammed together making a slash across her forehead. Thinking to herself, her throat hurt damn it come here. Watching him slowly edge closer, she patted the bed beside her for him to sit close since she had already yelled at a nurse and one doctor and they wouldn't tell her a damn thing. Insisting, she could wait until visiting hours to see everyone, NOT. Her head was pounding so hard she could feel the pulse behind her eyes. Gripping Gary's hand and leaning forward so he could hear her raspy voice. "Get me out of here! Now! Why am I here?"

"Slow down, you're not going anywhere, just yet." Gary placed a finger against her lips, knowing she was going to argue. Shaking his head, "We almost lost you last night Lena, so please do what the doctor say's so I can take you home and take care of you. Please." He wanted to hug her to him and cry out his relief. Sure,

everyone would look at him like he was crazed, but Gary didn't care.

"Almost lost me, what are you talking about?" Lena whispered since to do more, made her throat burn. She had had another dream episode. She remembered.

"Do you remember anything from last night?"

"Some, I remember dancing with you, a slow song maybe. My head hurts too bad to think about it. Just tell me what happen."

Taking a deep breath, "We had started dancing to a second slow song. We were talking, and then you were sliding through my arms passed out cold." Gary shuttered as the memory flashed into his mind.

Shooting the doctor a hot look and pointing at him with a weak shaky finger, "You finish were, he left off." Lena hissed.

With a pained look that did nothing to help his skinny face, "Only if you promise to lay back down and rest." Accepting her nod as an answer, "You ingested some sort of drug or poison. I would imagine Ms. Matthews, that you have the mother of all headaches right now, correct?"

"Yes."

Sending the nurse after something for the headache, the doctor continued. "Your stomach was pumped down in the ER after you arrived; your throat will be very soar for a few days. Later this morning after the admitting doctor has seen you, he'll probably have you moved to a private room for overnight observation, just as a precaution. So long as you continue to do well this morning, if there are any relapses, here you will stay. You did flat line last night in the ER, after they pumped your stomach, luckily your heart started back up on its own, with no use of the paddles. The lab results should be in this after noon also, we'll no more then."

"Please, lay back and rest." Gary's voice was gruff with emotion, "Jessica and Stevens are out in the waiting room, we can only come in one at a time for just a few minutes during visiting hours here in the ICU." He brushed her hair back from her face. "Last night took ten years off my life."

Taking the medicine from the nurse, she chased it with a sip of water. Oh, my god! Her throat was on fire. Lena's eyes shut tight, as a whimper escaped through the pain. Fighting her way through the soupy fog of pain was draining her strength. "Don't leave, stay

with me please Gary." Lena didn't like hospitals, never mind staying in one as a guest. "Please, Gary stay with me."

He could hear the pain and fear in her raspy whisper. Hoping to sooth her with his promise, "Babe, they would have to blast me out of here to get rid of me, I'm not going anywhere without you. You've got about an hour; until visiting hour's start so get some rest." He brushed her hair back from her face with his fingertips.

The darkness was taking over again drawing her in against her will. Giving in to it she prayed for the pain in her head to ease and that she wouldn't dream walk. "Okay." She rasped, and felt the first signs of leaving her body to join with another.

Feeling Lena's body go slake and her breathing even out, even with the signs of her resting, he was still reluctant to leave her side. But, nurse ratchet and her pint size side kick had returned once again to give him the boot. Brushing his lips lightly over hers, not knowing if she could hear him, "I'll be back, love."

Returning to the waiting room, Jessica was sitting up now, wide awake with her spine ram rod straight next to Stevens. Gary motioned for her to stay seated, "Lena's okay, mad as hell about being in the hospital, but she's okay. They might keep her until tomorrow just for observation. We'll have to wait until her doctor comes in, before we know for sure. She has a major headache, and a sore throat. The nurse came and got me because she was giving them hell, for being kept here and not knowing why."

The sound of papers rustling and an insistent beeping noise was very annoying. Lena had to fight to get her heavy eyelids open enough, to see where the noise was coming from. The headache was down to a dull throb. A man in a white lab coat was standing next to the bed reading her chart, he must be the doctor. Good, he could discharge her now and save himself the time of checking on her later. Scooting up in the bed Lena pressed the button to raise herself into more of a reclining position.

"Good morning Miss Matthews. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Better thanks."

"Don't talk too much, your throat will probably be very soar for a few days."

"Go ahead and discharge me, I want to go home. I can heal there just as well as here."

"Depending on how you're doing, you'll be able to go home tomorrow morning. You were in pretty, bad shape when you arrive here last night. I'll have you moved to a more private room this morning. Please, do not try to get out of bed without help; I am leaving instructions with the nurses."

"I'm not staying!" She was being childish and she didn't really care, crossing her arms over her chest pouting for not getting her way. "I am never sick, so there's no reason for me to stay another night. I can go home and my family can take care of me there." She said in a raspy whisper after seeing the doctor's bored unimpressed expression.

"Miss Matthews."

"Lena, call me Lena."

"Very well, Lena. Do you know what a tranquilizer is?"

Frowning because Lena didn't understand what this question had to do with her staying here or going home. "Yes, I do."

"Good, to be more specific, equine tranquilizers called Rompem and ace."

"Yeah, sometimes we have to use them at the farm. Why?"

"That's what you ingested, a very lethal dose. You are very lucky to be alive and talking to me. To make sure you don't have any more side effects, I insist you remain a guest at least until tomorrow."

My God. Horse tranquilizers, "How did I ingest horse tranquilizers? That's impossible."

"Not impossible. And you drank it with your wine Lena."

"My God, it was in the wine, I remember the wine, vaguely but I remember drinking it."

"I was told the police want to talk to you sometime this morning. But not until your moved to another room."

Waving her hand at the doctor, "Fine, that's fine." Rubbing her forehead, damn, "How much, what was the dosage I ingested? Do you know?"

"Enough to stop your heart and it did. You are very lucky to be alive. I'm not familiar with equine medicine, so I called one of the local equine vets here in Tampa. As for the dosage, I can't say for sure."

How would it get in the wine? Someone would have to put it in there. Who would do something like that to her and Why? Was someone trying to kill her?

"I'll check on you later this afternoon."

"Okay." The thought of someone putting horse tranqs in her wine made her head throb harder. Closing her eyes, praying for the throbbing to quit she tried to clear her mind, do not think about it now. Later, she would think about it later when her head wasn't fixing to explode.

Three hours later, Lena was propped up in the bed waiting for Jessica, Gary and Stevens to come back. God, she hated hospitals the smell was offensive to her nose and the colors were washed out looking, she guessed they were supposed to be calming to the eye. Humph. More like alarming, because of the lack of life in those colors. Lena had never been close to anyone that had spent any time in a hospital. Other than visiting a friend and her new baby a couple of years ago, she hadn't had a reason to be in a hospital.

At the sound of a knock on the door she didn't bother to turn and look, but in her peripheral vision, the shocking sight of a big floral arrangement had Lena's undivided attention. "Wow, who sent those?" Barley able to see the short squatty man carrying what looked like a basket that held a small but amazing flower garden.

"Where would you like me to put this ma'am?"

She pointed to a rolling table pushed against the wall directly across from the foot of her bed. "Over there would be fine. Thank you"

Placing the basket in the center of the table, the little man was short and pudgy all over with thinning gray hair. Plucking the card from between the flowers he handed it to the pretty lady on his way out the door as he said, "Don't try to lift d'basket it's very heavy missy."

There was nothing but her name on the outside of the envelope, maybe they were from her mother. Brows lowering with that thought, damn she hadn't even called her mother. Nodding her head in agreement with herself, Jessica would have called mom. That thought lead to another; she did not like her mom staying in that house alone. Not with everything that had been happening

lately, Lena thought raising the tab on the envelope, and sliding the card out.

A big heart in the center with a little boy and girl, one on each side facing each other and in the center of the heart Gary had written, "Don't ever scare me like that again! Love Gary." Lena couldn't help the smile that burst across her face, pressing the card to her chest. Her heart was kinda fluttering around in her chest, with happy little sighs, warming, and swelling until they were nearly overflowing with love and happiness. She had tried to wrap her heart in anger for being lied to all this time. But her heart had simply refused to listen to her brain. She read the card again, Love Gary. Yep, she was in love for the very first time, gaga, head over heels in love. She wasn't the type to be Gaga anything. She shoveled horse poo for shit sake.

What a kick in the pants this is. Oh, she wasn't going to tell him just yet. Nope, she was keeping this big secret to herself awhile longer. Wonder what he would say or do if she was to tell him now in front of Jessica and Stevens. Probably run for the hills. Mom had said if you wanted to get rid of a man fast, start talking commitment and you would see the last of their sorry backside as they rounded the corner on the way out of dodge. Even though, Gary didn't seem like a runner. Lena had no intentions of scaring him off with the L word.

Stevens pulled Blondie to her feet, "Let's go down to the cafeteria and get something to eat." He was having a hard time keeping that distance between himself and Jessica on a personal level. He really didn't want distance. But, with everything else going on in her life, she didn't need him complicating it more with a relationship. Damn Relationship, where had that come from, for years he made sure the women he dated knew up front, there was no commitment or relationship possibilities. Stevens thought, staring at the middle of her back as they made their way to the elevators. And here he was thinking about jumping over the line himself first.

Gary leaned back in his chair watching the doctors and nurses come and go in the hospital cafeteria. He wasn't able to eat. The thought of food made his stomach knot up. Stevens had inhaled his

food like he hadn't eaten in three days. Jessica was pushing her salad around the plate with a fork not really interested in eating. Understandable after what happened the night before, just thinking about it made his whole body breakout into a cold sweat. He had never fallen in love before. Yep, his mother would have laughed hard over this, him Gary Hard Ass Wellington falling in love with some smart mouth, hot-tempered red head. Now all he had to do was move her along so she was feeling the same.

Lena should have gotten the flowers by now. Wonder what she thought about those. Hearing someone call his name to the left of him, Gary searched the crowd of people milling around in the cafeteria. Spotting the detective, he had talked to on the phone. At least now, they could get this over with, Gary thought standing up as the detective made his way to their table.

"Mr. Wellington nice to meet you, I'm detective Landon. If you have time I would like to ask you a few questions."

"Sure we'll do our best to answer."

"Do you remember approximately what time this happened last night?"

"Some where around eleven, eleven ten, right before we stepped out on the dance floor, I had told Lena to finish her wine because it was almost gone. We might have been on the dance floor a minute maybe two when she passed out cold."

"Did you see anyone around your table, anyone messing with your drinks? Was anyone watching your drinks while you were out on the dance floor?"

"No. We weren't really paying any attention to our drinks even though we're only a few feet away from our table, this party being invitation only you would think we wouldn't have to worry about someone putting drugs or anything else in our drinks."

"You would think. So you had to show your invitation before you were allowed into the party correct?"

"Correct."

"Who else was drinking wine? There's two wine glasses at the lab."

Gary was wondering where the detective was going with his question as he nodded his head towards Jessica. "Jessica was also drinking wine."

Turning slightly in his chair toward the blonde, he had seen when he was approaching the table, he hadn't been able to see her face, and Wow. "Ma'am, what is your last name?" He knew his outward appearance showed nothing of his thoughts. Pen poised directly over his small memo pad, he looked her straight in the eye waiting for an answer.

Pushing her salad a way, cops must take a course and intimidation. The hard stare they give you while they're asking questions. Folding her hands together on the table in front of her, Jessica looked him in the eye as she answered. "Lane, Jessica Lane." She said as she watched his eyes lower to focus on her lips.

His eyes lowered to her lush naked lips as he asked, "Do you wear lipstick, Miss Lane?"

She tilted her head slightly to the side. "Yes I do, why?" The tone of her voice told him she was not amused by him and his questioning gaze.

"Would you happen to have it with you?"

"Yes I do." Opening the small bag, she had taken to the party with her. Jess took out the small slim tube of lipstick and handed it to the detective. "You're not going to keep that are you?"

"No, I just need a sample of your lipstick. One of the wine glasses has two different kinds of lipstick on the edge."

"What do you mean two different kinds of lipstick?" She didn't like the direction this conversation was going.

"Colors, I meant two different colors."

Stevens watched the expression on Jessica's face. She was doing pretty good trying to hide her fear as the knowledge sank in, that it was her glass, Lena had drank out of. He glanced at the lipstick in the detective's hand, and then back at Jessica before he asked, "Is that one of the colors on the glass?"

Nodding his head, "I would have to say it is, though the lab will have to do some tests to make a positive match. The color looks right." Taking a small bag from a hidden pocket inside his coat, he dropped the tube of lipstick in and sealed it closed. "The other wineglass only has one color of lipstick on the rim and there was no trace of the drugs found in the glass. I would have to say Miss Matthews drank out of the wrong glass."

"So only one glass had drugs in it?" Jessica's stomach was tightening up more and more with each question the detective

asked, to the point what little salad she had eaten was threatening to come back up.

"Correct. So, what I need to know Miss Lane is who would want to kill you? Is this the first time something like this as happened to you?"

"Oh God, are you saying she drank out of my class?" She was horrified at the thought of Lena almost dying from the drugs that had been in her wine glass, meant for her to drink, not Lena.

"Yes ma'am, I would have to say she did. That would be my guess."

"Stevens, why don't you take Jessica back up to the waiting room and I'll finish up here with the detective." Keeping a low voice so no one could hear them beyond their table, his eyes direct, letting the detective know without saying anything else, that he would be the one to finish answering any questions.

"It's time for visiting hours anyway Jessica, you can go visit with Lena for little bit." Stevens said wanting to punch the detective for scaring Jess. Taking her by the elbow he helped her up from the chair and wrapped his arm around her waist.

Gary waited until Stevens and Jessica were out of hearing range. He would rather be up there visiting with Lena to instead of sitting down here in the cafeteria. "So what other questions do you have?"

"What kind of relationship do you have with Miss Lane and Miss Matthews?"

"I'm Miss Matthews's trainer and a friend of Miss Lanes. To save you some legwork, if you call the Volusia County Sheriff's Department, They can answer some questions pertaining to Miss Lane."

"What kind of answers can I get from the sheriff's department out there?"

The detective was starting to grate on Gary's nerves a bit with his smug sarcasm. "I'm not going into any kind of detail here; call Captain Daniels with the sheriff's department." Taking one his own cards out of his wallet, he wrote the Captain's phone number on the back of it and handed it to the detective. "That's his number one in the back, and you can reach me on the cell number that's on the front of the card."

The detective flipped the card over and read the front of it. "Well shit, homicide, Atlanta PD. I had a feeling you were more than

some horse trainer.” He slid the card, memo pad and pen into the same pocket with the evidence bag nodding his head at Wellington. “Looks like I have some calls to make. Do you know when the doctor is going to release Miss Matthews?”

“Sometime tomorrow, the doctor didn’t say when.”

“Then I’ll come back later today and speak with Miss Matthews.”

Shaking the detective’s hand as they stood, “We’ll see you later today then and make sure you call the Captain.”

“That’ll be my first call when I get back to the station.”

Gary had waited until the detective had left before he went back up stairs to Lena’s room. He wanted time to think through everything before asking any questions. Jessica had looked like a strong wind would have blown her out of the chair in the cafeteria after the detective had said Lena had drank out of the wrong glass, which was saying too much in his opinion. Stopping at the doorway of the waiting room to see if Stevens was here or Lena’s room, seeing no one he continued on to Lena’s room. The closed door puzzled him but he could hear Lena talking quietly inside the room.

Opening the door and stepping inside the room, Gary closed it quietly behind him; he understood why the door was closed now. Jessica was sitting on the edge of Lena’s bed hugging her tight and crying. Casting a questioning look at Stevens, who looked miserable sitting in a chair next to the bed.

“Blondie you’re going to drown Lena with all your tears.”

Catching her breath, Jess glared at Stevens with puffy blood shot eyes, sitting next her. “You can sit in the waiting room if you don’t like it.” Jessica said hiccupping as she took the tissue he offered.

“I don’t like leaky women, but that’s not what I said anyway. I don’t think Gary would appreciate you drowning his soon to be.” Stevens said wiggling his brows at Jess as he smiled a big toothy grin at her.

It was days like this Gary wondered why he was friends with Stevens. “Zip it Stevens you’re just as leaky as any woman.” He said and pulled a vacant chair up to the other side of Lena’s bed.

“Would you two stop poking at each other and what do you mean by his soon to be?” Lena didn’t really want Stevens to stop poking

at Jess; she needed a good man in her life. She thought as she frowned at both Gary and Stevens waiting for an answer.

“Yeah, Gary what she, said.” Stevens scooted down further in his chair trying to get comfortable. He figured poking at Gary would refocus Jessica and Lena’s mind for a few minutes.

“Zip it Stevens.”

Jessica sat up to glare at Stevens as she wiped under her eyes with another tissue he had handed her. “What are you talking about?”

The butterflies were back with their whole family and they had taken up residence in Lena’s stomach. She thought as she looked from Gary to Stevens and back, she raised one sardonic bow as high as it would go. “Soon to be what and I want an answer this time Gary, what is he talking about?” Lena said her voice was still hoarse and raspy.

“I have no idea what Stevens is talking about, sometimes he gets diarrhea of the mouth.” Leaning back in his chair smiling a big toothy grin at Stevens across Lena’s bed, that said I’ll pound on you later.

“You will not be pounding on Stevens later.” Jessica said as she looked over her shoulder at Gary.

“What did you say?” Gary shot Jessica a puzzled look wondering how she had known what he was thinking as he looked at Stevens.

“Why would you say that Jess, Gary never said he was going to pound on me later?” Stevens mind and body was alert now, and he wanted to know why she had said that.

Jessica covered her face with both hands and rubbed hard, God not again please not again. This was so creepy, if Gary didn’t say he was going to pound on Stevens then how did she know. “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

Stevens leaned forward and took Jessica’s hands in his so she would stop rubbing her face that was now red and puffy, “Why did you say that Jess?”

Seeing no way out of this conversation, she shrugged her shoulders and gave up. “I thought he said he was going to pound on you later.” Okay this sucked Jess thought to herself, she could see the laughter in Stevens eyes. “Don’t you dare laugh at me.”

“Wouldn’t think of it Blondie.” Releasing her hands he resumed his position in the chair, his eyelids drooped to half mass to watch

her. He knew that Gary's look meant he was going to pound on him later for running his mouth but only because they had been friends since diapers. Not literally, though they did pound on each other when they were still in school, of course boys will be boys.

How had she known what he was thinking? Gary let the question go for now, he took Lena's hand and kissed the back of it. "How are you feeling?"

Rolling her head on the pillow to the side Gary was sitting on. "I would feel much better if I was home and had an answer to all my questions." Both of her brows rose expectantly as she waited for the answer.

Playing dumb wasn't something Gary did gracefully, "What answer would you be talking about?"

"Bad move playing dumb with Red here, she's sharp."

"I'll see if the nurses have any super glue on hand, since you have a problem keeping your lips shut on your own." He glared at Stevens for getting him into this trouble with his big mouth.

"Quite trying to evade, the question is soon to be what, now tell me what he was talking about?" If she could get up she would bash both their heads together.

"You answer her Stevens since you're feeling so chatty today."

"Are you sure you want me to answer the question?" Smiling another toothy grin, that said maybe I should pound on you later, at Gary.

This time Jessica was looking at Stevens when he smiled and she watched his lips to see if they moved, they didn't. *Just hell*, how had she heard him then if he didn't speak the words? Looking away from Stevens before he caught her staring at him, "Lena the man is in love with you. Okay, there Gary it's out in the open now you have to learn how to say it for yourself."

Shrieking in a raspy voice, "He what?"

Lena was looking into his eyes when Jess had spilled the beans. Judging by her reaction this wasn't good conversation material, but here they were right in the middle of it. Shrugging to him-self mentally might as well be both feet. "I confess its true Lena."

"Calm down Lena, shrieking isn't good for your throat." Good at least she wasn't the only one shocked, Jessica thought to herself.

"NO you're not liar." She wasn't mad; oh no she was happy and scared at the same time. But was he telling the truth or was it

another lie, Lena wondered as she searched his eyes for a sign either way.

"I'm not a liar and yes I'm in love with you, we'll deal with this later you need to rest now." Gary stood waving at Jess and Stevens to leave the room ahead of him.

"Yeah making us leave so we miss all the fun, it's not fair. I tell ya Blondie he does this to me all the time."

A laugh escaped as Jessica elbowed Stevens in the stomach on the way out the door. "Quit teasing him before he comes out here and pounds on you for real."

Lena wanted to call Jessica back, it was cowardly and she knew it. "I don't want to talk about this Gary." Okay, so she did want to talk about it and she guess now was as good a time as any since she wasn't going home today.

"To bad because we are going to talk whether you want to or not Lena. If you don't want to talk fine then you can listen." Gary opened his mouth to continue and stopped when someone else knocked on the door. Just once he would like to have an uninterrupted conversation with Lena, Gary thought, he opened the door with the intention of running off who ever, was on the other side of the door. Great it's detective Johnny come early, opening the door so he could come in. "It's nice to see you again detective."

"Sorry to interrupt, Wellington I'll be as quick as possible. Miss Matthews, I hope you're feeling up to answering a few questions."

Awe a reprieve even if it is in the form of a detective, Lena thought as she waved the man to a chair inviting him to sit. "Sure detective I'll do the best I can."

The detective noted the look of relief as it crossed the woman's face, and her raspy voice. "First I'd like to ask if you know why I'm here Miss Matthews."

"Yes I know, you're here about the wine." She said as Gary sat on the bed next to her feet.

"Correct, how much do you remember from last night Miss Matthews?"

Lena looked up at the ceiling thinking back to last night trying to remember, "You can call me Lena, and I remember drinking the wine after that I'm blank."

"Did you notice anyone standing close to your table?"

There was something there, but it wouldn't come clear. She had seen something but she couldn't remember what it was. "I remember being puzzled about something, but about what I don't know, nothing comes to mind."

"Can you give me a time when something was puzzling you?"

Gary knew it was while they were dancing to the tango, he remembered her slight miss step as they had passed their table, but he hadn't thought anything of it at the time because the dance was passionate and strong in its steps, thinking Lena had just stepped wrong. "We were dancing the tango Lena, and as we passed our table you missed a step." Gary kept his tone soft and conversational trying to help her remember what she had seen.

Lena closed her eyes and let the song of the tango fill her mind with the passion and steps as they had worked their way back and forth across the dance floor last night. In her mind, she could see as her steps faltered on the dance floor close to the table. There standing next to the table, stood Bradley and Alex. "Bastards, it had to be Alex and Bradley." Lena said, the anger make her voice clearer and stronger than it had been earlier.

"Lena, are you saying, you saw Bradley at the club, how could he get in without an invitation?" It was good thing Lena was stuck in the hospital till tomorrow and he would be staying here with her. Not to mention it was a good thing Stevens hadn't also seen Bradley. Maybe Gary could talk Stevens into staying here with Lena and Jessica while he hunted Bradley down.

"He came with Alex that's how. After the race Saturday I went looking for Alex and never found him. Some of the other jockeys said he left in a big hurry with some big man. It never crossed my mind that they even knew each other, let alone link Bradley with the big man description."

"Miss Matthews can you tell me who Bradley and Alex are and why they would puzzle you?"

"Oh sorry, Bradley Jacobs he's the owner of a Resort and spa in Daytona, and Alex Sanchez was my jockey. He tried to throw the race Saturday while he was riding for me."

"So that's why you were looking for him." Gary said to know one in particular. He couldn't remember anything about the race, that would suggest the jockey was trying to throw it and lose the race though. "Why do you say Alex was trying to throw the race?"

Lena was feeling much better now, killing better to be exact. "It's simple, for one Rich hates the rail and Alex knows it, also as they came around the last turn Alex was holding Rich back. Lot of good it did him since Rich rolled over the bit nearly yanking the reins out of the idiots grip."

"Back to the question about why they would puzzle you?"

"They were standing together next to our table and drinks. Bradley sees everyone, as beneath him, he would never socialize with the likes of Alex or anyone for that matter, with the exception of Jessica. Bradley sees Jessica as his property. His soul possession." She was looking at the notes the detective was jotting down but was unable to read them since he was writing in short hand.

"Do you know what kind of relationship Miss Lane and Mr. Jacobs have?"

"An abusive one, I've seen bruises on Jessica's arms a few times, if you put him in jail would you give me the key so I can throw it away."

Gary closed his eyes and thanked the gods Stevens was not in the room when Lena said that. "Do not question Miss Lane in front of Stevens detective, let me know when you would like to talk to her and I'll go with you and clear the way, I hired Stevens to follow her because I suspected Jacobs was abusive."

He understood what Wellington was trying to convey without saying it out right. "Sorry ma'am I'm not allowed to have the keys or even access to them."

"I know but it never hurts to ask now does it." Lena said and smiled at the detective for understanding.

"Since there were no finger prints on either of the glasses I have to ask, do you think Alex could get his hands on the tranquilizer that was put in the wine?"

"Yes, I keep some stored in a locked cabinet at the farm or he could have gotten it from one of the other jockey's."

"What about Bradley Jacobs could he have gotten his hands on some?"

"Not unless he's best friends with an equine vet or he could have stolen it from my place but I don't think that's the case. We keep a chart for all medications stocked at the farm and each dosage used is logged, so someone at the farm would have noticed a

discrepancy between the bottle of tranquilizer and the chart.”

Unless Lena thought to herself, they took it Saturday morning after they’d left the farm. Damn it.

“I can see you’re in some pain Miss Matthews so I’ll let you rest and if I have any more questions I’ll call you.”

“Thank you Detective and I hope you catch the Bastard.” She didn’t finish with, before I do.

Gary squeezed Lena’s leg closest to him to get her attention.

“You need to rest; I’ll get the nurse to bring you something for the headache, Okay.”

“Thanks, I could use some aspirin to take the edge off the pain.”

Closing her eyes to shut out the light, a short nap sounded like heaven she thought as she heard the door close behind Gary and the detective. This time she could dream about snapping Alex and Bradley’s neck after banging their stupid heads together.

The detective waited for Wellington to pull the door closed behind him. “I’ll wait to question Miss Lane for now.”

“Did you call Captain Anderson?”

“Yes and the phone call save me a lot of time so thanks.”

“You’re welcome and if anything else comes up I’ll give you a call, the sooner Jacobs is caught the better all around.” Gary figured Stevens already knew Jacobs had been abusive to Jessica, it would explain his strange behavior around her.

“Better let the nurse know Miss Matthews need something for her headache Wellington.” The detective said as he walked toward the elevator.

He stayed where he was until the detective stepped on the elevator and the doors closed behind him. Spotting a nurse coming toward him, “Ma’am could you have someone bring Miss Matthews something for her headache.”

“I’ll get it for her sir; I’ve been waiting until you were through talking to the man that just left to bring it in.”

“Thanks I appreciate it.” Gary could feel the last 24 hours catching up with him as he walked down the hall to the waiting room to join Stevens and Jessica, choosing a chair in the corner next to Stevens facing the doorway.

“Wellington you look like hell.”

“Stevens leave Gary alone he’s exhausted.” The poor man looked ready to fall over, Jessica thought and if Stevens didn’t zip it as

Gary said she might go find the super glue herself. He’d done nothing but talk and talk since they had sat down in the waiting room.

“There’s a hotel across the street, we could get a couple of rooms and get a good night’s sleep.” Stevens had been kicking the idea around while talking her ears off. It made him smile to know she was ready for him to shut the hell up, but Blondie had smiled and laughed a few times at the things he had said so it was okay.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Home sweet home, what bullshit Lena thought mad at the world in general, like she had time for rest when the farm needed to be run, horses to take care of and employees to check up on. Who in the hell had time to lay around on the couch or in bed. Picking up the remote to the TV she flipped through the channels.

If she could just get her body to cooperate she would go down to the damn barn by herself and check on Rich. Maybe she could talk Gary into carrying her down there. Having already tried to get up off the couch on her own, Lena had felt as if all the strength had been sucked out of her body. Just trying to set up was a lesson in frustration.

Channel surfing on the TV was not her thing. Stopping on a news channel with a breaking news banner flashing across the top, she pressed the volume button, turning the volume back up to hear as the announcer was saying, "The East Coast Lover has taken his seventh victim right here in Tampa, Florida. Stay with Channel 6 for more live coverage of the press release by the Tampa PD. In one hour."

"Why can't anybody stop this bastard?" Feeling her muscles strain, she tried to slide her legs over the side of the couch and sit up. Flopping back on the couch, exhausted from the effort. "Gary!" Lena knew Gary and Stevens were in the kitchen. She had heard them talking quietly before turning the volume up on the TV. She needed the damn phone, where in the hell were people when you needed them. "Gary!"

"Quit trying to yell you're going to make your throat worse than it already is." Sitting on the edge of the couch, he brushed her hair back from her face as the last word of the newscaster, caught his attention, he turned to face the TV. "Damn it"

"Gary the....." Cut off by his finger on her lips. Lena stared at the TV

"To bring those of you who are just turning to Channel 6. The East Coast lover has taken the seventh victim in Tampa, Florida. The name of the victim has not, been released yet and the Tampa PD has not confirmed that the deceased is one of the East Coast lovers of victim's. The Tampa PD will be issuing a press release in one hour. Stay tuned for live coverage with Channel 6."

"Stevens?"

"I'm on it!" Stevens said as he took the stairs two at a time heading for the office.

Pushing the power button on the remote to turn the TV off, "Lena," Gary said as he turned and saw her pale complexion, he wanted to reassure her that everything would be fine. "We need to have that talk now. It can't wait any longer, if you let me finish before you say anything. I'll explain the best I can about what's going on." Seeing her lips part, she was fixing to say something, he pressed his index finger to her lips again to keep her from talking. "Let me explain first honey."

Lena nodded her head in acceptance as she removed his finger from her lips.

"My name is Gary Wellington, and I am from Atlanta, Georgia. I do train my own horses, but that's not all. I've taken a leave of absence from the Atlanta, PD homicide division." Gary explained, pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and handed it to her, watching her. She flipped it open to see the badge. "I'm a homicide detective with the Atlanta PD"

Rolling her lips inward to keep from saying anything just yet since she knew he had lied to her, well withheld the truth anyway, it's the same difference, she thought to herself holding his wallet in her hands rubbing a thumb over the badge. "What are you really doing here in Florida?"

"Trying to catch or help catch The East Coast Lover."

"And Stevens?"

"Stevens is a Private Investigator, also my best friend or more of a brother and the only family I have left."

"The only family you have left what do you mean by that?" She asked as she looked up at him, his only family was Stevens. How could that be, where was his mother and father?

"I'm an only child. My parents are gone now." Gary wasn't going to tell her who was responsible for one of his parents being gone, not right now.

"I'm sorry, it must be horrible." How could she stay mad at him? After hearing, his parents were gone, and Stevens was the only family he had left. Lena couldn't even imagine what she would do if she didn't have her mom and Jessica.

"Does this mean you're not mad at me anymore?" He asked, as he traced her lower jaw bone with his finger. Mad or not he wasn't going anywhere, not now or ever.

Laying her head on the pillow she closed her eyes, and let out a frustrated breath. "Maybe, I don't know. I hate being lied to Gary, for any reason." A Homicide Detective from Atlanta, did this mean he would be leaving after they caught the East Coast Lover. Lena wasn't sure if she even wanted an answer to that question.

Gently brushing his lips across hers, "I'm not leaving Lena. Not unless you're going with me." Sinking deeper into the kiss, farther than he had intended to go. This morning they had all gotten home at nine a.m. and since then he had been no further away from her than hearing distance in case she need something.

Feeling her muscles warm and tighten, the blood flowing through her veins heat with desire, Lena whimpered in protest as he broke the kiss. "You make my head swim when you kiss me like that."

Resting his forehead against hers, cradling the back of her head with his big hand, rubbing gently with the tips of his fingers. "God, I thought I'd lost you Saturday night. I cannot let you go Lena I love you, Heart, body and soul!"

Just hearing him say those words again made her heart expand and at the same time feel panic, skitter down her spine. Lena knew she couldn't say the words, she didn't know if she would ever be able to say the words back to him, so opting for the old fall back of an old cliché. "It's too soon, this is too fast. I care about you Gary that will have to be enough for now."

"Is there anything I can do to move you along a little quicker?"

Feeling a smile trying to break loose, Lena was unable to stop it. "You are persistent aren't you; I guess you could keep trying to wear me down." Seeing the love and caring in his eyes. What would it be like, to be-loved like that for the rest of her life? Would he stay or would he get tired of her, just as her father had done

when she was a baby? Lena wished her mom was home for her to talk to, frowning at the thought of her mom not being home. How long had it been since she had seen her a week?

"What's wrong?" Questioning the look on her face, he rubbed her wrinkled brow with his thumb.

"Have you seen mom?"

"No, I think Jessica talked to her Saturday night, I'm not sure."

"Can you give me the phone; she may still be in town."

Rising from the edge of the couch, to get the phone he tried to recall the last time he had actually seen or talked to Anna, sometime last week, Tuesday or Wednesday maybe. Worrying because he couldn't remember for sure he handed the phone to Lena, "Let me know if you find her, I'm going up stairs to talk to Stevens. We'll be in the office if you need anything."

Hitting the first speed dial button for one of her mom's friends number, hearing it ring. "Okay." After eight rings, she hit the end button to call the next number, no answer there either. Hanging up again, she tried number three on the speed dial. Where are they, if none of them were home?

Passing Jessica's room, with door closed. She's probably sleeping after taking something for her headache. Making a mental note to make sure Jessica ate something in a couple of hours if she wasn't awake. Continuing on to the office, Gary hoped Stevens had more information by now. "Anything new?"

"Hang on." Stevens snapped, his fingers moving swiftly over the keyboard eyes locked on the monitor.

Sitting in the big leather chair in front of the desk, Stevens was working his magic with the computer. Gary wanted to check in with his Captain in Atlanta this afternoon. Knowing the Captain would be in a foul mood as usual, with him taking a leave of absence and all. The squeak of the desk chair snapped him back to the present. "Spit it out."

"Same credit card was used for reservations at a very elite restaurant charged Saturday night." Stevens settled back in the office chair, to rock back and forth slowly while his fingers tap on the arms of the chair. "Do you want to know the sad part?"

Stevens knew it irritated him when he did his, I know something juicy act. "Waiting."

"The sad part is not only did the creep pay while we were at the club about fifteen minutes after ten but the restaurant is at the opposite end of the block of where the club is." Stevens laced his fingers together behind his head, as he leaned back a little further in the chair. "That's what you call close but not close enough."

"Damn! I'll call detective Landon and let him know. We need all the help we can get to catch this slick bastard. Did you get a name?" Taking out his cell, he asked and flipped it open in one smooth motion.

"Hold on, not done here. It is the same credit card as before, the address matches, Gary. Donavan Hamilton is the cardholder's name. The killer is here in Daytona, I would bet on it. Let me check some of the other charges on this card and see what that gets us. They may try to cut me off if you tell them now."

"How long do you need?"

"Give me an hour."

"Done I'm going to check on Jess and Lena then head out to the stables, be back in an hour." He stopped in the doorway of the office, remembering on his way out to ask about Anna. "Did you or Jess get a hold of Anna, while we were at the hospital?"

"No, we didn't. Jess and I both called her several times, but no one answer the phone. Jess tried the number where Mrs. Matthews was staying with her friend in town. No one answered there either."

"Thanks." Gary decided he would drive Lena to town and check the houses of all her mom's friends if she hadn't gotten a hold of her by phone. Anna missing for a week really worried him since Jessica and Stevens hadn't been able to get a hold of her Saturday night. From the look on Lena's face she wasn't having any luck now either.

Come on come on. Where are you mom? Lena thought laying her head back on the couch trying to calm herself, who could rest when their mother was missing? Do not panic, panicking will not help. May be she should call Rosaline Avezet, Mrs. Cragg's housekeeper. Shoulders hunched, holding the phone limply in both hands. She really didn't want to call her, just thinking about what had happen to Mrs. Cragg and the fact that her mom was nowhere to be found made her want to scream.

"Find her?"

"No," Heaving a frustrated sigh.

Gary lowered himself on to the couch next to Lena, hip to hip; he tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "Want to take a drive into town? We could drive by her friend's house, and check on your mom in person. On the way back we'll stop for some sort of take out."

It was times like this when he had love so blatantly obvious, shining in his eyes, Lena wondered why fighting what was between them seemed like the stupidest thing in the world. Why, shouldn't she grab on to his love with both hands and hang on for dear life. "I can't even get up off the stupid couch Gary. How am I going to walk up to the door of all these houses to see if mom is there?"

Slipping the phone from her fingers and laying it on the coffee table, "I'll carry you that's how."

He had such big strong hands, Lena thought as she laced her fingers with his. "I've called all her friends that are programmed in the phone and no one is answering their phone. Are you sure you don't mind doing this Gary?"

"I'm just as worried about your mom as you are, Lena? I'll tell Stevens we're leaving, be back in a second."

The sound of muffled footsteps coming toward him barely registered. So absorbed was he, in the information he had been able to dig up on Bradley Jacobs and Donavan Hamilton. Trying to find the link between the two was the last step. Though he knew, they were one-and-the same. FBI and cops wanted hard proof, tangible. Chasing the social security number and other personal identification for the two men was turning out to be a synch. Working his laptop and Lena's computer at the same time was child's play for him; he grunted a hello to Gary.

"I'm taking Lena into town, we'll pick up something to eat and bring it back." Not waiting for an answer, he headed back down the stairs to get Lena.

"Wait. Got something here, Gary!"

"What?" Gary barked, he was impatient to get on the road.

"Same person, I know it is. Jacobs and Hamilton."

"Who's Hamilton?" Frowning as the information Stevens was giving him sank in.

"The Credit card, Bradley Jacobs and Donovan Hamilton is the same person."

"Son of a Bitch, I knew Jacobs was responsible for putting Lena in the hospital and nearly killing her, but I had only suspected him for the East Coast Lover murders."

"Yeah, I'm still digging through this mess. When I get done you can shoot it to whoever you want and leave my name out of it." Stevens said as the rest of what Gary sank in and registered. "What do you mean you knew he was responsible for nearly killing Lena?"

Damn it, Gary thought to his self as he looked at Stevens sitting at the desk waiting for him to answer. "Lena fingered Jacobs and the Jockey; she saw them at the club standing next to our table and the drinks."

Stevens sat back in the chair as he let the pieces fall into place. "He was trying to kill Jessica." He shoved all ten of his fingers into his hair as it sank in.

"I don't know, Jacobs was with Alex so he may have been after Lena and they put the tranquilizer in the wrong glass."

"Has anyone been able to find Jacobs?"

"No, no one has seen or heard from him since last week sometime."

Fools the whole lot, to think they are smarter than I am. Two, I had had two lovely ladies and one whore this weekend. Like hide and seek, would they find the second lovely lady. I do love a good treasure hunt. Unable to stop the rumble of sardonic laughter from coming out, the sound jarring him back to more important thoughts. Staring blankly, at the fifty-two inch plasma screen, his left hand laying firmly on the leather bound journal, his index finger following the trail of gold leaf lettering in the center, he was lost, deep in the dark thoughts.

Finally, the recognition I deserve. Couldn't the yapping rats conceive something greater than *The East Coast Lover*? Of course, they had never figured out dear old dad's secrets back in the 70's now, did they? No sir ate up with the dumb ass syndrome. Chuckling to himself, father would be proud. Look father I am a star, sunlight catching on the shiny surface of a picture frame, throwing a blinding glare in his eyes blocking all else out.

Reaching with his right hand he snatched the picture off the desk. Bringing it closer *Ah, yes my one true love*. I will come for you soon. Can you hear me my sweet are you sad your whoring friend is dead? His tone little more than a whisper, crooning, wooing. As father once said when he quoted Shakespeare

Gentle breath of yours my sails
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please.

Soon my love, soon for now I have work. The beast lurks with in the Black fog. How true this is. Smoothing the pad of his thumb over the face in the picture locked in the frame. *I will have you back Jessica. None will stop me.*

She was finally sitting up on the couch with her feet planted firmly on the floor without any help. Thinking of everything she need to do, preferably on her own two feet, seriously irritated her knowing she would have to literally depend on everyone else to help her in order to get it all done. Well, now she's rested like a good girl, it's time to get the body moving. Leaning forward a little she pushed down on the cushion scooting herself closer to the edge of the couch, she was so determined to stand on her own two feet, on her own that she had forgotten about going into town and Gary being back down in a second.

Standing at the bottom of the staircase he watched Lena struggle forward, to the edge of the couch, and why he had no idea. Hard headed woman was going to end up either on the floor or face first on the coffee table. Shaking his head he walked quietly in to the living room, and stopped at the end of the couch, to see how far she made it on her own. Figuring he was close enough to catch her if she started falling forward, Gary decided to give her a jolt as he stood there, and cleared his throat loudly, "Hhheemmm..."

"Eeek.." Squeaking as the loud noise startled her made her whole body spasm. Lena was so engrossed in trying to scoot forward on the couch; she didn't even hear him sneaking up on her. "Idiot, don't do that."

"Serves you right for trying to get off the couch by yourself," Cocking one eyebrow Gary waited for her to deny it.

"So I'm busted, are you ready to go warden?" Gary was right damn it, that didn't mean she had to like it. Gripping the edge of the cushion she was sitting on wondering if her legs would hold her up if she had a little help. Glancing over at Gary standing at the end of the couch, "You could help me stand up, instead of carrying me."

"I could, yes. The point is your not to do this alone Lena, you'll end up hurting yourself worse." Moving around the end of the couch to stand in front of her, Gary noticed the white knuckled grip she had on the edge of the cushion. "Why are you griping the cushion so tight?" He asked as he bent down to pry her fingers from it.

"I was just sitting here imagining that it was your neck my fingers were wrapped around. Why did you think I was doing it?"

"Ah, it must be love your feeling when you think of me, you know you do love me." She was leaning heavily against the hand he had placed on her shoulder to keep her up right as he pried her fingers loose. "Relax your fingers and let go of the couch."

"No, I don't think so, I probably have the flu."

"Okay put your arms around my neck and hang on." Sliding his arms around her waist and hugging her to him he stood. He stepped to the side of her, "Okay, how are your legs holding up?"

"Fine as long as I don't move. My knees are locked." Lena won't bother mentioning how it was also kind of painful to stand like this.

"Ready for me to carry you to the car now?"

"Might as well, my feet are planted firmly and they don't seem inclined to move no matter how much I want them to."

Picking her up he cuddled her against his chest, "I like carrying you." Gary commented as he strolled through the kitchen and outside to the Jag. "Next time I'll give you a piggy back ride."

"Not happening."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rolling on to her side, Jessica felt stiff from lying in the same spot for so long. Groaning from the effort to straighten out her legs, she glanced at the alarm clock beside the bed, closed her eyes again and stretched her arms over her head, extending them out she bumped something very warm. Heart hammering, trying to escape through her ribs exhaling the breath she was holding she opened her eyes to see who was lying next to her. "Damn it what are you doing in my bed Stevens, besides trying scaring me to death."

"Ssshhh... go back to sleep. You're so peaceful to watch sleeping. Like an angel." Ten minutes tops, gorgeous absolutely, gorgeous. Rising up to sit on the edge of the bed he asked, "Want a drink? Beer, tea, coffee, water" Not a safe place to be Stevens, with her a wake. *Time to run; I'm a coward, Oh Yeah, big time.*

"Where is Lena?"

"Gary took her to town to look for her mom and to pick up something to eat for dinner. They should be back in a couple of hours or so. Beer sounds good meet me in the kitchen." Damn woman could send a man into cardiac arrest just by pinning him with those big blue eyes, made him feel like a moth pinned to a corkboard in a science experiment and the lips, Good God. Sinful, lush, the kind fantasies were made of. Not hanging around for an answer, Coward, Yep, you bet.

Head in the fridge, Stevens rummaged for something to snack on not finding anything but the beer, he thought maybe there was some chips around there somewhere.

"What're you doing?"

Jumping he banged his head on the top refrigerator door, bobbed the two beers in his hand and nearly lost his grip. Bumping the door closed with a hip, he felt the sore spot on the top of his head and glared at Jessica. "Damn woman, give me heart failure anyway. Why you want to do that to a guy?" Muttering, more to

himself he didn't expect an answer from her. "There's no peace around you."

Arms folded across her chest, hip against the counter. He was so cute, just adorable Jessica thought as she waited for his grumbling to end and rolled her eyes. "I'm a peaceful person."

"Humph. Says who?" He opened both beers and took his to the far side of the table, distance was what he needed, and he detoured at the back door to go out on to the porch. Settling himself down in a wooden rocker and lit a smoke, just as the back door opened. *Distance is what we need just keep your distance Stevens.* Damn woman was killing his peace of mind.

Stevens had just finished gathering the rest of the information Gary would need for the cops working the serial killer investigation, when he had heard a soft moan that sounded distressful. Then he remembered Blondie was taking a nap. Stevens had made damn sure to keep his mind clear as a bell while lying next to her watching her sleep. Thinking about it now, he leaned his head back on the rocker and took a drag off the cigarette.

Jessica opened the back door, "Lela, come on girl. Come on out." Hearing her toe nails clicking on the tile floor. She stroked her hand down the big broad back as Lela passed through the doorway.

Lela, her nose to the air sniffed, she went down the stairs growling, and trotted over to the fence by the stable.

"Stay up here Lela." Knowing the big girl would listen, Jessica was wondering at the growl.

"She smelt something." Keeping his voice soft, only Jess could hear what he was saying.

"Yes."

"She won't run off will she?"

"No, she'll stay. Do her business, then come back up and lay here on the porch." The feeling of being, watched by some unknown person was creepy and very irritating.

Lifting the beer to his lips, the sun was setting low behind the trees, nearly dark. Stevens debated on checking out the woods or not as he sat in the rocker drinking his beer.

"Don't go out there." Knowing he was thinking about checking out the wooded area just irritated her more. He appeared relaxed in the wooden rocker, except for the hard look in his eyes.

"Mind reader now?" Stevens had wondered off and on, how Blondie knew what Gary was thinking at the hospital yesterday morning, and now she seem to know his thoughts without him actually voicing them. Could be that Blondie was just very perceptive or was there something else going on. He wasn't sure which way to lean, instinct or something more.

"Guy thing."

"Kinda sexist, there."

"Not really," Listening to the sounds of the approaching night, Stevens and Lela. Hearing the warning growl come from Lela again, sent a sharp chill down Jess's spine. "Come," Her voice no more than a whisper.

"I'll just check it out," Standing slowly, his body tense ready for action.

"No." No sign of Lela, but Jess knew the sound had come from the other side of the vehicles.

"She might go into the woods and get lost."

"Lela's trained for certain things."

"Is your middle name vague? That's the kinda answers you give, vague Ninety nine percent of the time."

"No and No." Giving a high-pitched whistle that sounded like a bird calling. Commanding Lela back to her side, "Now, Lela." After several very tense seconds, she could hear Lela making her way back to the porch.

Unable to resist the jab, "Trained in what?"

"We should go back in." Her body was tense, her eyes locked on the tree line searching for the unknown. Someone or something was hiding, watching them while they sat on the porch.

Keeping Blondie in his peripheral vision he was barely able to make out the big dogs tail laying at the outside edge of the soft porch light. Lela had to be pushing two hundred pounds, of muscle and fur. The body language of the dog and woman was very tense. "Take Lela back in the house I'm going to sit out here and enjoy the fresh air for a while."

"Going in and leaving you out here on the porch is not going to happen. The only way Lela and I are leaving this porch is if you go in with us. So save your breath."

"Feisty, tonight aren't you." The long, low warning rumble of Lela growling was barely heard up on the porch. Stevens was not

a, what if kinda guy, and didn't take any pleasure in playing the what if game. But, his mind was throwing a lot of what ifs out there. "Has the dog ever acted like this before?"

"A few times."

"Here recently?" Nice and she's just now saying something about it after everything that's been going on.

"Yes, at night when I let her out for the last time before bed. Sometimes in the afternoon, there are black bear, deer and panther here; I thought that she may have caught their sent."

Keeping the dog in full sight, the big body of the dog was crouched, her muscles tight, and coiled ready to spring into action at any second. Not an animal. Human, that's what Stevens would bet. The soft light coming off the porch only reached maybe seven to eight feet out into the yard. "You didn't answer the question."

"Attack, guard and track."

Both brows winged up to the band of his Stetson hat, now why would a woman have her dog trained like that, did she feel threatened, unsafe? "Because?"

Facing Stevens directly, "I live alone, for one. Two, there have been some things, strange things happening at night." Shrugging a little it wasn't a big deal, every since she had bought the house two years ago, Jessica had the creepy feeling someone was watching her.

Apparently vague was the flavor of the night. "Call her back up on the porch, better yet, let's just go back in."

"Good idea, Come Lela." Opening the door, for Lela to go in first, seeing her pause once more with her nose in the air smelling for something Jessica and Stevens couldn't sense. Alarm zipped down Jessica's spine at the sight of Lela's raised hair. The hair from the back of Lela's massive head all the way to the end of her tail was standing on end.

"Yep, she looks pissed off if you ask me." His hand was on the door just above Blondie's, standing this close he could feel her body heat.

"Do you have a gun?"

"Yes and no you're not going to use it, so don't ask," He said wondering at her questioning if he had a gun.

"Mine is upstairs so I won't need yours but thanks anyway."

Frowning, his displeasure after hearing Blondie had a gun.

"We'll just sit in here at the table till Gary and Lena get back."

Noting the position the big dog had taken, laying under the table, facing the back door, still tense, coiled and ready for action. Damn dog was making him tense and itchy, choosing a chair at the other end of the table, so he was also facing the back door.

From there he could see down the entryway almost to the front door. Flipping his cell open, he dialed Gary's cell number, they had been gone almost two hours now, he was hoping they had found Anna by now. Stevens didn't even know what she looked like since he hadn't even met Lena's mother. Listening to the ring he waited not so patiently for Gary to answer.

Gary parked the Jag curbside in front of a lovely single story beach house. Things were not looking good. This being the fourth friend's house they've been to. The first three, no lights, no sound, house locked up tight, and no one home. Streetlights had come on a half hour ago, good thing. Mrs. Bartlett's house was dark also, didn't even leave on the porch light. Releasing Lena's hand, "I'll go up and check; maybe she's already gone to bed."

"Not getting my hopes up." Tapping her foot on the floorboard of the Jag, nervous energy had filled her up more and more with the passing of each empty house. Where in the hell was her mother. Holding off the panic and bad thoughts was becoming harder and harder. She watched Gary saunter up to the front door, without a care in the world.

This wasn't like her mother, not to call or leave a note. Hell Lena had her cell phone, not even a message left on voice mail. Barely hearing the sound of Gary knocking on the big Oak front door, he was trying to peek in through the windows on the sides of the door. The clock on the dash of the car read seven fifty eight. Providing it was right it was still kinda early for most to be in bed for the night.

Nothing was making sense to Lena. Where was everyone? The waiting and not knowing was driving her to the mother of all migraines.

At the sound of Gary's voice talking to someone, "Who is that?" Not sure if he could hear her through the closed window on the driver side of the Jag.

Opening the car door and dropping down behind the wheel, he left the door open "Calling someone to help."

"Why? It doesn't look like Mrs. Bartlett is home. Why would you call someone?"

"Lena you have to stay calm, you're supposed to be in bed resting. Not tense and upset, running all over town."

"Tell me why, Gary."

Resting his head on the back of the seat, Gary could hear the TV blaring before even getting close to the porch. "TV is on; I rang the door bell several times and banged on the door. Still no answer, so I called one of the detectives I had met here at the Daytona PD he's on his way, said to wait here."

"Did you try any of the other windows?"

"No and we're not going to, either."

"Something's wrong, something bad has happened, hasn't it."

Flipping open the vibrating cell Snapping out, "Wellington."

"On your way back yet?" Stevens asked, Gary's barking into the phone didn't faze Stevens one bit since they used to be partners.

"No, it'll be a while from the looks of things. Why?"

"Call your buddy; have him send a drive by."

Jerking upright in his seat at the tight sound of Stevens tone, "Hang on," Getting out of the car he closed the door, walking a few feet away so Lena couldn't hear what he said. "What's going on there?"

"Nothing so far, we were just having a beer out on the porch, and the damn dog acts like she's ready to rip someone or something a new ass. Figured, to be on the safe side have someone drive by check out the road side west of the property line."

"I'll call it in, if this, whatever it is here at Mrs. Bartlett's house turns out to be nothing we'll be on our way back with burgers or something." Gary raked his fingers across the top of his head, making his hair look windblown. "How's Jessica, has she woken up yet?"

"Yeah, she's sitting here in the kitchen with me and the dog."

"The police officer just pulled up, call you back in five." Ending the call, Adrenaline pumping faster with each second now, the thought of entering the unknown fed it fuel like dry, dead brush tossed on a fire. Dialing Captain Daniels cell, "Sir, this is Wellington, there's something wrong out at the Matthews farm,

can you have someone check it out. I didn't want to call 911, Stevens is there with Miss Lane, and it's probably just someone poking around in the woods."

"Sure, we'll check it out. Call you back."

"Thanks." Gary closed the cell phone ending the call. He noticed another police cruiser had pulled up while he was on the phone. Opening the door of the Jag, he leaned down into the car, to check on Lena. "Stay in the car, until I come back out and keep the doors locked okay."

"What's going on?"

"I don't know yet Lena, please stay in the car." Gary said shutting the door not waiting for a yes or no as he turned to both of the Officers walking toward him.

"Mr. Wellington, you're the one who called in a problem?"

"Yes," Glancing at the name pinned to both officers shirts. He pulled out his wallet and handed it to Officer Brown.

"Ways from home, detective Wellington. What has us gathering here on such a fine night?"

"My fiancé and I have been searching for her mother. We haven't seen or talked to her, Anna Matthews, since Tuesday of last week. Tried calling her friend, were she was staying, no one answered the phone so we drove into town to check on her in person." Gary jerked his head at the front door of the house they were standing in front of, "This is the fourth house; Mrs. Bartlett is one of Anna's friends. I went up to knock on the door, ring the bell, but no one is answering. The volume on the TV is blaring so loud you can hear it before you get to the porch. Called it in to make sure nothing is wrong."

"Okay, Jones and I will check the front door, if we get no answer we'll precede around back. Are you in Daytona for personal or business reasons?"

"Personal, I took a leave of absence." Gary did not want to give any more information than he had to, not yet anyway.

Pointing at the door with his chin, "Probably fell asleep with the TV on, hard a hearing, most likely." Officer Jones said.

"Let's make sure."

Falling in several steps behind the two officers watching them repeat his steps, banging on the door, announcing themselves. Ringing the doorbell and getting no answer, keeping the same

distance, as they moved towards the back of the house. The gate going into the back yard was hanging wide open; Gary could hear the TV even better now. Stopping at the corner of the house, next to some shrub plants, an awning covering the back patio, Gary nodded at Officer Brown, that he would cover the rear.

"Patio door is open just a few inches." Officer Brown said.

Both officers drew their guns and proceeded in a crouched walk stopping at the edge of the patio door. Officer Brown looked in, filling the doorway, his gun out front moving from right to left searching for any threat. Brown stopped at the doorway between the den and what looked to be a dining room. Officer Jones came in behind him and crouched at the end of a love seat. Along the wall to the right coming in the patio door one big entertainment center took up the whole wall, in the center, a big flat-screen playing wheel of fortune. Pointing with his head to check the rest of the house, Gary took Browns position as he and Jones move off into the bowels of the house. Hearing Jones inhale sharply as he looked down behind the big couch, Mrs. Bartlett must be on the floor. Considering how green Jones face was turning, it must not be a pretty sight. Watching him turn away, and head to the front rooms making sure they were secured Gary held his position; until he heard both Jones and Brown give the all clear.

Moving to the end of the big couch, "Damn, it." Mrs. Bartlett was laying spread eagle with her clothes ripped. With what looked like multiple stab wounds. Eyes open staring up at the ceiling, blank.

"Do you know her?"

"No, I've never met her is there anyone else in the house, is she the only one here?" He had to know if Anna was here in the house.

"Yeah, she's the only one. Damn house looks like a hurricane went through the other rooms. Call it in Jones; we'll move out on the patio. Did you touch the front door knob?"

"No. The only thing I touched was the doorbell, that's it."

"Okay."

"I need to check on Lena, she's sitting in the car."

"I'll walk you out; ask her some questions while we wait for the crime scene investigators to get here."

Lena was breathing kind of heavy and sweating with the effort, to open the damn car door. "Shit!" Wiping her forehead with the back of her hand, she maneuvered her legs around and put both feet on

the pavement. "Where the hell is he, damn it and what is taking so god forsaking long?" The sound of a boot heels scraping on the driveway coming toward her, made her jump.

"Going somewhere?" Squatting down in front of Lena, he wiped the sweat off the side of her face. "You're too weak to risk standing, remember we tried this before leaving the house." Sliding his right hand under both knees he lifted them and turned her in the seat, placing her feet back in the car. Wiping the other side of her face, he noted how pale she was. "It took a lot out of ya just that little bit of moving around."

Lena laid her head back against the headrest and closed her eyes. "Yes, this is very frustrating, not being able to do anything."

"I bet."

"Mrs. Bartlett?"

Dropping his eyes to the ground, Gary tried to find the word to ease what he knew was going to be painful.

"Tell me, straight out just say it." She tried to read his eyes but they were cold and hard looking, whatever he had seen inside the house wasn't good. Lena was learning quickly what cop eyes looked like.

"She's gone."

"Gone! Dead how, how did she die, damn it Gary?"

"I don't know yet." Okay so that was a big lie, he hated lying to her. But the truth was ten times worse. At least this bought some time.

"Stroke, heart attack, what?"

"I don't think so."

Staring Gary in the eye, she could see there was something he didn't want to tell her. "Not by natural causes." Closing her eyes, "Someone murdered her, she was killed. Is that it?"

"Yeah, I didn't want to tell you, but yeah that's the way it looks. Officer Brown would like to ask you some questions if you feel up to it."

"Are you sure it's Mrs. Bartlett?"

"No, but she's the only one in the house. Age is about right, early Fifties. Do you feel up to answering some questions for Officer Brown?" Whoever stabbed that poor woman in the house was defiantly in a rage. Chased her, tortured and raped, from the way

everything looked. No way, would he ever describe any of that to Lena. There were things cops did not share with their loved ones.

"Okay, can we go after I answer his questions?"

Gary tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear. "Yeah after you answer his questions we'll get some burgers and go home." he said

"Where's my mom, Gary? I'm really, worried, this isn't like her, if she made different plans she would have called and left a message or went home and left a note. That's how it's all ways been. Mom wouldn't just go off somewhere and not tell anyone."

"Miss Matthews, I'm Officer Brown. Would you mind if I asked you some questions?"

"Sure go ahead, and then you can help me find my mother."

Laying her head back on the headrest again, she let her eyelids close. Her body was so fatigued from just trying to get out of the car, her head felt like it weighted twenty pounds.

"Okay." Getting his memo pad out, "Did you know Mrs. Bartlett well?" The officer squatted down next to the car where Mr. Wellington had been.

"Yes, she's been a friend of my mother's for a bout ten years or so."

"Do you know if she's married, does she have a husband or children?"

"No, she never had any children, her husband passed away twelve, thirteen years ago I think."

"Mrs. Bartlett, have any other relatives. Sister, brother, parents?"

"No. Just her, she was the last of her family."

"Okay, that's all the questions I have for now. There may be more later on."

"Fine, now you can help me find my mother." Bracing her hands on the seat, she pushed herself into a sitting position and leaned forward to stare straight into the officer's eyes. "The other friends, can you check on them? I'll give you names and addresses. We went to three other houses before we came here. Please check on them, all of them are fifty-plus in age and have no family they're all widowers. There's something wrong, my mother wouldn't just take off like this, and neither would any of her friends."

"Sure, write down the names and addresses, we'll check them out and make sure everything is okay. If your mother doesn't turn up,

you'll need to file a missing persons report, Miss Matthews." This was part of the job he could live without. The pain and suffering of those left to live on. "Write it down and give it to Wellington, he'll make sure I get it. I'll call you; let you know what I find out." Standing back up he headed around the back of the Jag as one of the Daytona Homicide detectives arrived on scene.

After giving the names and addresses of her mother's friends to Gary, she rested her head against the headrest again. This was another, longest day of her life. Where was her mother? Do not think; do not think any further than that. Wait until you get home to let the rest in. Hang on just a while longer. Lena felt her cell vibrating in the bottom of her purse and she had to fish it out. "Hey, how's it going at the farm?"

"NOT. You and Gary need to come home, now. Please Lena."

Pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and finger to hold off the worry after hearing the strain in Jessica's voice and why was she whispering, like she was in a church anyway.

"What's wrong, Jess? Where is Stevens?"

"He's here, he called someone earlier, I think it was Gary. Lela is pacing and so is Stevens. He keeps checking the windows, it's creeping me out and pissing me off. I Do Not Like feeling like this. I have tried talking to him, Humph. Get more response from a wall than you do him."

"Hang on, stay on the phone." Leaning her head out the door, yelling as loud as her tired body would allow. "Gary!" Flopping back against the seat, "Are you still there Jess?"

"Yeah, did you find mom yet?"

"No, I'm really worried this isn't like her, Jess."

"I know me too. There something going on here, but what I don't know. Lela was growling earlier while we were out on the porch. We came in, she seem to calm down some. Then a few minutes ago, she started growling and pacing around. She keeps sniffing the doors."

"The doors?"

"Front and back doors. I have never seen her so riled up like this. All of her hair on her back is standing straight up. Something has her really pissed off, Lena. Are you guys coming home?"

“Yeah, Gary’s getting in the car now; we’ll be home in a few. Don’t let Lela out.”

“Kay. Hurry up.”

Closing the cell and tossing it back in her purse. “Stevens call you?”

“Yes, what happen?”

“I don’t know that was Jess on the phone.”

The Jag roared to life with the twist of key, “Do we need to skip the burgers?”

“I have to get home, something’s wrong out at the farm.”

“Captain Daniels sent a car out to check on things, but he hasn’t called back yet. I can have us there in a few minutes.” Traffic was thinning out this time of night, almost eight o’clock.

“Who is doing this to me? And why?” Her voice was little more than a raspy, whisper. Muscles heavy and lethargic, she was so tired she had to brace her head in her hand, with an elbow propped up on the door.

“I have some ideas on the, who,” He said lacing his fingers with hers as they sped toward the farm and home.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The panic and fear that had ruled her body for almost a month was growing and expanding, consuming her mind and body. Jessica felt like a Foreigner in her own body. Only family she had to call her own, was Anna and Lena. She didn’t work at a real job so what. She didn’t have to, since coming into her inheritance. Most would say she was a loner and that wasn’t true she was just a very private person.

“Its nobodies damn business anyway.” People should just mind their own. Unaware she had spoken her thoughts out loud, while hunched over at the kitchen table. Toenails clicked on the tile as Lela paced back and forth. She should be mad, spitting mad like her dog. Only time she had ever seen Lela like this, was when Bradley had come to the house and tried to force his way in the front door. Snapping her eyes shut, she inhaled a deep breath through her nose, and exhaled slowly. “Damn it, Bradley wouldn’t be out there would he?”

“What did you say?” Stevens hoped Blondie had calmed down some.

“Bradley he may be the one out there, outside the house.”

It would be nice, a little pay back. Not very professional of him, but there it is. “You figure this how?”

Glancing in Lela’s direction it looked like KuJo had taken over her dog’s body. Drooling and snarling with her hackles standing on end wanting something to rip apart. “She acted like this when he came to the house a couple of times and tried to force his way in.”

Un-fucking believable, Stevens was getting a better look at the big dog as she stalked over to the back door and sniffed the crack. Growling louder as a car door shut out side, sniffing some more. This time instead of growling, she started barking happily and jumping around in excitement. The abrupt change in the dog had him shooting a questioning glance at Blondie.

"Lena and Gary are home." Thank god, a buffer between her and Stevens.

Lena was surprised she hadn't ended up in the floorboard of the car. Her body felt limp as a wet rag. Head lolling to the right as Gary opened the car door and scooped her up out of the car to carry her inside. "Thanks I was wondering how to get from the car to the house."

Gary's long stride made it a quick trip into the kitchen since Stevens was holding the door, open. He made his way around on the backside of the table, with Lena still cuddled against his hard chest. "I'll take you upstairs when you're ready." He informed Lena as he was settling back in the chair with her in his lap.

"How are you feeling?" Jess asked, stirring the chicken noodle soup, she had started when they had pulled up.

"Tired, what happen?" She could see the irritation in Jessica's movements. The way she stirred and scowled at the soup, it would be mush by the time she got through with it.

"Same as before, like you told me when you felt that someone was watching you from the woods over on the west side of the fence. We were out on the porch and Lela started growling and acting the same way she did before, when Bradley tried to get into the house."

"Bradley doesn't seem like the kind of person that would sneak around in the woods to spy on you." No, he was more of a direct, in-your-face asshole, Stevens thought.

Gary pulled the chair next to him closer, "Can you sit up on your own, while you eat?"

"Yeah, at least long enough to eat." Lena hoped, no longer annoyed by the fact that she couldn't do much for herself. The doctor had told her it would take another day or so, for the drugs to wear off.

Sliding Lena into the chair he draped his arm over the back. "Why don't you help Jessica make us something to eat, Stevens?" Gary said, keeping an eye on Lena, he wasn't about to move away from her side. She was shaky at best and she had to eat to regain her strength.

Jessica rolled her eyes at the thought of Stevens helping her. "Thanks, but no, you helping me cook is like having another left foot."

Lena could feel the strain in her cheeks from trying to smile. Listening to the banter going back and forth, between Jess and Stevens, the mischievous sparkle in Stevens eyes, made her wonder until Jessica brought the bowl of soup over and sat it in front of her, she could see the same in her eyes. Lena had never seen Jess poke fun with or at a guy, ever. Leaning forward bracing herself on her elbows she lifted the spoon to her lips. A straw would be faster than a spoon, she thought after watching most of the soup in the spoon slosh out. After taking a few sips of the chicken broth Lena noticed her throat was already feeling better.

Taking the cold cuts, cheese and veggies out of the fridge and fixing all three sandwiches, before taking them to the table with her. Jessica chose a chair at the very end of the table to keep the distance between her and Stevens. He was a touchy feely kinda guy and she liked it way too much, keeping her eyes on her food, Jess could see his hands, he had good strong hands.

"Since it's after eleven, I'll call Captain Daniels in the morning. He would have called me back if they had found anything during their drive by earlier."

"Did you get anything on Anna?" Stevens asked, finishing off his sandwich. Oh, he had noticed the distance Blondie had kept between them. Making sure to stay out of arms reach was probably for the best. When this was over with, he would be going back to Atlanta and she was not the short-term fling type. Nope, Blondie was definitely a permanent kind, and not for him. He settled for joking with her and poking fun because she needed to lighten up some.

"No. There was trouble though and it'll keep until morning since there's nothing we can do tonight." Stacking his plate on top of Stevens, Gary slid the spoon from Lena's trembling fingers dipped it in the bowl and brought it back to her lips. He wasn't surprised when Lena didn't bother to argue over him spoon feeding her, her hands were shaking most of the soup off the spoon before she could get it to her mouth. "You get KP duty, Stevens."

Stevens gave Blondie a pleading look; he wanted her to keep him company a little longer. "Please I need help, I'm a guy."

Scoffing at him without looking up, he could not be serious Jess thought. "Can't, I have things to do."

"Oh, yeah maybe I could offer my help then, I have great hands and I'm very helpful."

"No. Thanks." She stacked her plate with the others before she took them to the sink. "You have dishes to do."

"It won't take me long to do the dishes." Stevens said as he opened the dishwasher, load it quickly and closed the door. "There I'm all done." He said turning to find she had already left the kitchen.

Gary lifted both of his brows in amusement. "Better get some rest Stevens, busy day tomorrow." Picking Lena up out of the chair, he cradled her against his chest and headed up the stairs to her bedroom. "Are we sleeping in your room or mine babe?"

Sighing she relaxed in Gary's arms after straining to hold herself upright this felt like heaven. "My room is closer." She said softly closing her eyes as he carried her up the stairs. "Are you staying with me?" Unsure if he actually meant he was sleeping in the bed with her, or if she was sleeping alone. She really didn't want to sleep alone.

"Yes, I'm staying. You need to sleep, so don't get any ideas about messing around." He brushed his lips across her forehead. At the top of the stairs Gary realized he didn't know which bedroom was hers. "Which door?"

"Across from the office," Lena couldn't help smiling as she told him which room was hers.

Stevens settled himself on the couch with Lela sprawled out in the middle of the living room floor. "Yep, it's just you and me big girl." *Stevens you need to wrap this up quick and get the hell out of town, fast and on the double*, he thought. Forcing his mind to focus on his business in Atlanta instead of Blondie's excellent legs, don't think about the legs, their attached to a lot of trouble. Permanent kind of trouble he thought and drifted off to sleep, dreaming about Blondie and those excellent legs of hers anyway.

Bradley decided he needed to get out of town for a while, take a vacation. Him and Jessica, she said she didn't want him anymore, but he knew she just wanted more of his attention. That's the way

women were, mad at you when you didn't pay them enough attention. He would fix that; they could spend a couple of weeks in the Bahamas and rejuvenate. Have quality time together just the two of them without that bitch around to fuck things up. He knew what was best for his Jessica and she had said she wanted to get married, so they could get married while they were on the island.

Seeing the scratches on his chest he applied some triple antibiotic ointment to them. The old bitch had fought like a hellcat. Going to see Jessica at the club had been a big risk, but he couldn't wait any longer. Son-of-a-bitch, what a high it was to have two lovers and one whore in the same weekend. The old woman hadn't been as risky as seeing Jessica the whore before she died, and the old woman fighting the way she had, made his dick harder than ever before. She had screamed and screamed, damning him to hell. No sir, no begging from that old bitch.

The others had cried silently, pleaded and begged for their life before he stopped their heart with his knife. One thrust stopped it from beating ever again. Powerful, he felt very powerful. No one would ever stop him, just like father. Dumb ass cops, they were scampering around with no evidence and nothing to help them catch the killer. He snickered to himself as he dressed. Fucking pillar of the goddamn community, that's what he was. He would go out and pick Jessica up at her house, and then they could start their vacation together. He would make her understand she loved him and needed him. Damn scratches were going to chaff a bit against his shirt. Nothing he could do about it now since it was time to go to work.

Rolling over on to her back, Lena stretched her arms over her head as she flexed her toes and then moving up to her legs. The muscles were responding much better this morning still slightly fatigued but better and Gary's arm across her ribs felt very comforting.

"Morning," Gary's eyes were warm and sleepy as he watched her come awake before glancing at the clock on the nightstand it's Five a.m. "Coffee, be back, in a minute."

"You're not going to help dress me again?"

"Be back. Coffee."

“Man of my dreams. Some help you are!” Lena grumbled as the bedroom door closed, and realized her throat wasn’t as sore this morning. The big t-shirt Gary had put on her last night was twisted and hiked up around her hips. Sighing as she remembered his erection that had been pressed against her, his body heat coming off in waves. An answering tug started down low working its way through her entire body. *Need to get dressed you can’t lie in bed all day*, she thought as she slid her legs off the side of the bed and sat up at the same time. A little wobbly but not too bad, she tested her legs by putting some weight on them, now fully standing, hanging onto the edge of the bed. “Not too bad, now to make it to the closet,” She released the edge of the bed slowly, taking two slow steps to test the strength in her legs. “That’s not so bad.” She whispered to her-self. The bedroom door opened suddenly and startled her. “Damn it, scare me to death will ya.”

“What the hell are you trying to do Lena I said I’d be back in a minute?” Gary grumbled stalking over and sitting the coffee cups down on the nightstand with one hand and gripping her elbow with the other, bracing her as she started swaying back and forth. “Probably wouldn’t do any damage to that hard head off yours, if you fell and banged it on the floor.” Still grumbling he slipped his arm around her waist and turned her back to the bed.

“Never know, I could have made it to the closet had I not stopped when you opened the door and scared me.” Glaring at him, her eyes narrowing as his lips twitched with the effort to keep from smiling.

“Maybe, have your coffee and I’ll get your clothes or do you want a shower first?” He hadn’t slept much last night; since his body had started throbbing before they had reached the bedroom door. Still hard as a rock and throbbing with ever heart beat, the thought of taking a shower with her, washing her body, touching her with his soapy fingers sliding over her skin. Gary closed his eyes and gulped down his coffee burning the roof of his mouth and tongue. “No, no shower, I can only handle so much Lena, I’m a man and I want you bad enough now as it is.”

Patting his knee, “You would have to hold me up and wash me,” Lena smiled at his deep groan while sliding her hand up high on his thigh. His hand gripped hers to stop her progress from making it any higher.

“I can only take so much, Lena and your body needs rest. We’ll get you dressed, feed you breakfast and then go down to the stables, to check on things and its back to bed for you. Two hours and then you rest.”

Sipping her coffee carefully, “My jeans and t-shirt are in the closet; maybe I should dress myself I don’t want to push you too far.” One brow lifting in question, let him know she needed something other than rest; her eyes sparkled with a mischievous glint until he released her hand to continue its journey upward. She put the coffee cup down and focused on his lips. She wanted those lips on hers, needed his hands moving over her, touching and igniting the fire that waited with in her. She could feel it starting to flare deep inside. Lena wanted the flash and burn, inside her, joined with him moving deep inside, his body pressing her into the mattress.

The heated passion in her eyes was his undoing. Laying her back on the bed he pulled the shirt over her head and gave it a toss. Gary started with her lips, nibbling and licking them, heating a flaming path down to the creamy white mounds, flicking the taunt peaks into tight little buds begging for more attention. His hands molded her body, memorizing the shape and texture of her skin. He moved her to the center of the bed and kicked off his jeans. Leaning on one elbow, he used his free hand to trace her ribs with his fingers down to her navel. Her gasp as he touched her low on her belly went straight to his groin firing his blood to a boil. He continued down to the center of her heat pressing the sensitive nub with his thumb, his fingers slid lower and deeper into her. Hot, god she was hot and ready.

Whimpering and writhing under his touch, she needed more. “Please, Gary.” Her back arching and she lifted her hips to press against his fingers.

Gary moved between her legs and gripping her hips. “Look at me love.” Her eyes snapped open, glazed over with desire so hot it could have left blisters. Her long legs wrapped around his waist.

The silky heat of his erection barley touching and teasing her, she gripped his hard muscled shoulders. “Now” she pleaded as she rotated her hips upward.

One hard thrust forward, he drove himself deep into her center. Holding her to him a hard shutter worked through his entire body.

Damn she was hot and sheathed him completely. Hot, tight, and wet, her long legs wrapped around his waist and pulled her tighter against him, His teeth clenched together. "Now, please oh god Lena."

Pressing and rotating her hips in his grasp. Felt him pull back, thrust forward again, and sent her flying over the edge. Lights exploded behind her eyelids, his lips took possession of hers. Bodies fused, moving slowly, sliding, her fingernails digging into the strong muscles of his back. Her back arched off the bed again, his hips pounding hers rotated. Meeting him thrust for thrust. His body moved at a fevered pitch, tensing, he felt the clamping throb start deep inside of her. Lena let go, heart mind and body flying up and out, the sound of her name passed his lips before they crushed down on hers.

Tongues stroking they swallowed each other cries. Emptying himself into her, he gave her everything. The tight inner muscles clamped around him held him to her.

He buried his face in her hair at the curve of her neck. He levered himself up on his elbows. Brushing damp hair from her face, he kissed her eyes, nose, cheeks and lips, lost in her heart and soul he whispered his love with each brush of lips, "I love you." Feeling her body tense at his words Gary pulled back and looked into her eyes.

Lena's pulse picked up speed again after hearing his words of love. Keeping her eyes closed, they burned with unshed tears of happiness. Oh she wanted to believe he meant those three words. Opening her eyes searching his, "You don't have to say that. Being with you is enough Gary."

Seeing the disbelief in her eyes while he was still buried in her and starting to harden again. He would make her believe; show her what was in his heart. Gary pressed his forehead to hers, until the little ache surrounding his heart had him getting up and sitting on the edge of the bed. Thinking of a way to make her believe, he scooped her off the bed and carried her into the bathroom. He turned on the shower and he let her slide down the front of his body then cradled her face in both of his hands. Gary's eyes locked on hers as he brushed his lips across hers, "I love you Lena."

"Gary." Lena closed her eyes as her heart swelled with love. She had seen the tender love in his eyes. "Please."

He would keep telling her, for the rest of their life. "I do, I love you, Lena."

"Don't, please Gary you don't live here, you live hundreds of miles away." Her fingers wrapped around his wrists, holding his hands to the sides of her face. To hope and believe, to let herself love him in return, only to have him leave in the end would crush her rip her heart to shreds. Knowing he would leave was already hurting her. Shaking her head, Lena pleaded. "Please, don't."

"Lena, open your eyes." He used his thumb to wipe away the tears sliding down her cheeks as she opened her eyes, "I'm not going anywhere, unless you're going with me." Kissing the corner of her lips and kissing away the tears on her cheeks. "God, Lena I thought I had lost you Saturday night. I don't want to be without you, life without you holds nothing for me. Will you marry me?"

Her fingers flexed on his wrists, tightening at his question, her heart over flowing with love for him. Marry him and be his wife, a lifetime of love, this was something she had secretly hoped and yearned for. Lena searched her mind and heart, she wanted to say yes. "*Then what are you waiting for? He is for you, your soul mate. Your other half.*" Not now, go away. Lena thought. She had managed to ignore the nagging voice that seemed to be getting louder and more persistent with each passing day. She would not let anyone influence her decision, fate be damned.

Panic was setting in around his heart with each second that went by with no answer. He was afraid she would say no He wouldn't take no for an answer. He would wear her down, she loved him, he knew she did, it was in her eyes. He'd seen it when she thought he wasn't looking. At least he hoped to god it was love that he had seen. Soaping the body sponge he rubbed it over her body, bending and caressing her legs one at a time with hands and sponge leaving her skin soapy. Removing the detachable showerhead, he rinsed her body off. Gary kissed her lips, and lathered her hair and massaging her scalp.

The tension left her body and relaxed under his touch. Lena's mind was spinning with the thought of him loving her. Was he her soul mate, her one true love? Opening her heart to him and risk being hurt, knowing she hadn't used any protection during their loving each other. She had made that decision consciously, hoping to get pregnant before he left, not to trap him into marriage, but to

have a part of him to keep when he was gone. Now Gary was offering, his love and the promise of a lifetime filled with that love, it made her knees weak.

She waited until he had rinsed the shampoo out of her hair. Opening her eyes, they were filled with the love she felt for him, letting him see to the very, deepest part of her heart and soul, she barely whispered the words. "I love you."

Gary's arms tightening around her and crushed her to him as relief like he had only known once before was zinging through him, replacing all of the tension that had built up from no answer fearing her rejection. His lips slid over hers, fitting perfectly tongues tangling, soothing and tasting. Breaking the kiss he hugged her. "Answer my question, tell me Lena."

Lena moved back from him, and turned under the water to let the spray wash over her. She shut the water off and reached for a towel, secured it around her body stepped out of the shower.

"Lena," Gary yanked a towel from the rack and stepped out of the shower dripping water on the floor scowling at her in the mirror.

Taking another towel from the shelf, while looking at him in the mirror, she closed her eyes breathed deeply and opened them. Lena was hoping and fearing at the same time. Rubbing the towel over her hair her eyes locked onto his again in the mirror. "You don't have a ring."

Gary's heart beat hard in his chest. He released a pent up breath and turned her to face him smoothing the pad of his thumb over her lips and gazing deeply into her eyes. "Say it Lena, please tell me."

"I don't know, maybe I need time to think about it." She was only teasing him, because she didn't want him to think she would always give in to him so easily.

"To bad, I'm not giving you time to think about it. You might change your mind." Wrapping the towel around his waist, Gary could see the teasing glint in her eyes while she struggled to keep a straight face. "We'll get married tomorrow morning."

"What, are you crazy? Mom would disown us both if she didn't get to plan the wedding." Facing the counter she picked up the lotion as her own words came back to her. Damn it let the cat out

of the bag. "*And it's about time to.*" Oh, shut up. No one asked you. Lena thought with a smile.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Down in the kitchen, Stevens filled a mug with coffee and took it out on the back porch with him. Gary had just carried Lena down to the stables to check on things. The sun was just coming up giving off enough light he could see the grooms turning out the mares in paddocks close to the house. He sipped his coffee enjoying the first calm morning since he had arrived in Daytona.

He was contemplating a second cup of coffee before him and Gary had to meet with the Captain and homicide detective at the sheriff department when he heard someone moving around in the kitchen making what he hoped was breakfast. Going back inside, he could smell the bacon just starting to cook. Stopping in the doorway he expected to see Blondie moving around the kitchen. The woman flipping the bacon was not Jessica. Built different her hair was different too. "Hello." This must be Lena's mother, Anna. Wow nothing like having a house full of beautiful women, "You must be Anna?"

Smiling at the nice looking man standing in her kitchen doorway, she wondered where he had come from. "Yes, I'm Lena's mother and you are?"

Walking closer to the stove he inhaled the wonderful sent of bacon cooking. Extending his hand out, "I'm Stevens, Ben Stevens it's nice to finally meet you. I guess you just got in this morning?"

Anna turned back to the stove "Just. Are Lena and Gary down at the stables?"

Stevens leaned against the counter to watch her cook the bacon. "Yes ma'am, Lena and Jessica will be very happy to see you."

Sighing guiltily, "I should have called and left a message. I broke one of my own rules." Scooping the bacon out of the skillet she laid it on a plate lined with a paper towel. She had missed cooking this last week while staying in town with her friends.

"Need any help?" Anna looked tired, like she hadn't been getting much sleep.

"You can set the table; everyone will be pilling in here within the next couple of minutes."

Jessica stood in the doorway, listening to Stevens and her mom talk like they had known each other for years. Mom had always loved cooking for everyone and kitchen conversation while she cooked was even better. "Quit flirting with my mom, Stevens." Walking around the Island counter she wrapped both arms around her mom's shoulders in a big hug and kissed her cheek. "We've been worried; you didn't leave a note or call." Jessica stepped back, and searched Anna's face; there were dark circles around her eyes from lack of sleep.

Lips quirking at the corners, yes it was good to be home. "I'm sorry honey; I really didn't mean to worry everyone." The look in the man's eyes when Jessica came into the kitchen was very intriguing.

Sifting his fingers through the ends of her long silky hair that smelled like midnight blooming flowers. "Do I get one of those, a hug?" Stevens asked, he had dreamed of her again last night. She was wearing nothing but an, ankle length rob, the color of moonlight, dancing under a full moon surrounded by a lush flowerbed calling for him to come to her. Shaking his head, what craziness he thought, letting his hand fall to his side realizing both Anna and Jessica were staring intently at him. The thought of pulling her to him for a hug was not a good idea, but what the hell. He reached for her and she stepped back.

Swatting his extended hand away Jessica laughed. "I don't think so cowboy."

"Aw come on, pretty lady, just a little hug." Seeing the sparkle in Anna's eyes, he winked at her.

Brother he was a big flirt. Laughing and shaking her head, Anna shooed them out of the way with both hands so she could finish breakfast. Glancing over at the sound of the back door shutting, she paused, "Lena, honey?" Looking from Lena to Gary, as he carried her in and sat her down at the table, "What happen are you hurt?"

"Mom when did you get home and where have you been, we looked all over town for you yesterday." Lena said as she crossed her arms over her chest waiting for her mom to answer, completely

ignoring her question she tapped her boot on the tile showing her impatience. "You broke your own rule, mother."

Moving around Gary Anna hugged Lena tight. "I know honey; I didn't mean to worry everyone. We went to Miami for a few days."

Lena felt the rest of the tension and worry drain from her body. Miami, thank god they were clear on the other side of the state. "You still look tired, have you not been sleeping?"

"Some, everyone sit down breakfast will be ready in a few minutes." She said and kissed Gary on the cheek before going back to the stove. "Good, thank you for taking care of her."

Gary's eyes drifted down to Lena's face. "No problem, I plan to do just that for a very long time."

Lena held her left hand out and looked pointedly at her ring finger, and wiggled it for effect. "No ring yet will you look at that." Glancing up at Gary as she heard Jess and Stevens laugh.

He bent down so he was nearly nose-to-nose with her. "You said yes, no backing out now, we'll take care of the ring later today. Stevens and I have to meet with Captain Daniels and the detective from the Daytona P.D. at nine thirty this morning to turn over the information we have." He traced her jawbone with his finger remembering how lifeless she had been laying on the floor at the club. "Promise me you'll take a nap or at least rest until I get back."

"Jess and I should go with you so when you're done we can go shopping." Knowing he would veto that idea didn't keep her from wanting to go with him and at the same time wanting to stay home and catch up with her mom.

"No stay here and rest I won't be gone long." Gary brushed his lips across hers lightly, for getting they were not alone in the kitchen and not really, caring.

"Okay you two, cut it out. No mushy stuff before breakfast." Jessica said and sat in the chair across from Lena, "Have you set a date yet?"

Eyes drifting closed, "hmm. Not yet." She mumbled returning his kiss before she leaned back in the chair.

"How quickly can you plan a wedding, is a week long enough, the sooner, the better?" Gary asked.

Anna chuckled, "That's not enough time Gary. I know you two are in a hurry, but a mother has to have some fun when one of her girls finally decides to get married. There's a lot of work that goes into planning a wedding." Standing at the stove happiness filled her heart, to over flowing while thinking one down and one to go. "There will be a wedding, won't there. You wouldn't deprive a mother from seeing her daughter walk down the aisle would you?" Both eyebrows rising, letting everyone know that was a rhetorical question. "Good, that's settled. Breakfast is ready." She handed a platter filled with bacon to Stevens. "Take that to the table." She said following behind with two more platters filled with eggs and biscuits.

Anna watched her children; Lena and Jessica along with the two men sitting at her table as they filled their plates. For now her kitchen was filled with sunshine and laughter, but she knew time was growing short. The trip to Miami Florida hadn't been for fun in the sun. No, her people had met in secret, as was necessary when the dark pressed closer. Anna had fulfilled her promise to a sister now gone. To finish raising her daughter, like any other normal child. Anna had known the dark would come, her own mother had said so.

The fear she had felt early last Saturday morning had awaken her from a deep sleep, Lena standing alone in the yard surrounded by the light of a full moon. The Black Fog seeped through the dense forest surrounding their home. Even though the farm was protected, Anna had no way of knowing how strong the Damned hidden within the Black Fog was. Word was being passed along now, they had been found. The news of another sister lost over the weekend worried her. She was still unsure of the roles Lena and Jessica were meant to play thanks to the mind block her and Jessica's real mother had put on them when they were minutes old.

"Mom, why don't we go into town and do some shopping while Gary and Stevens take care of their business?" Jessica didn't like the worried look she had seen in Anna's eyes. It had passed so quick if she hadn't looked up when she did Jessica was sure it would have gone unnoticed. "Lena needs some things from town and so do I, and while we're in town we can get some ideas for the wedding." Turning to face Gary, she heard his thoughts of Lena needing rest. Jessica checked herself before commenting since he

hadn't voice those thoughts. "You two could meet up with us when you're done, and we can all go ring shopping." Stevens had been staring at her all through breakfast. So she was ignoring his presence at the table, which was no easy task.

There was something in Jessica's voice Lena didn't understand, but she got the hint that Jessica didn't want to hang out here at the house. "That's a great idea Jess," Glancing at Gary as he started shaking his head no.

"Not a good idea, you need to rest Lena doctor's orders." He didn't think anything would happen to them in town, but he still didn't like the idea of them going off alone without him or Stevens.

She didn't bother huffing; Lena knew Gary wouldn't like the idea. "I'll be fine and I've rested enough. Anymore rest you'll find me climbing the walls."

"It would make me feel better if you three waited until we got back from the Sheriff's Office." Then again Gary didn't like the idea of them staying here at the farm while he and Stevens were gone, either.

Taking her breakfast dishes to the sink to put a little space between her and all the thoughts she could hear that weren't being spoken for everyone else to hear. Frowning she rinsed her plate; Jessica thought it was odd she couldn't hear Anna's thoughts, glancing back at the table she smiled when she noticed Anna watching her. "Go get ready to leave mom, Stevens and I will do the dishes." Opening the dishwasher door and pulling out the bottom rack, "Come on Stevens bring the rest of the dishes over here."

Something was going on, Stevens wasn't sure what it was. But there was definitely an uneasy feeling hanging in the air. Stacking the plates on top of each other he carried them over to the sink. Stevens decided he liked the thought of the three women staying at the house alone even less than the idea of them traipsing all over town. "They should come with us to the Sheriff's station Gary, then God help me; we can all go shopping as Blondie said," Giving a mocking full body shiver as he let the word shopping roll off his tongue, to make Blondie smile.

Planting a smacking kiss on Gary's lips, Lena smiled at his frowning face. "See even Stevens thinks we should go." Slipping

her fingers beneath the collar of his shirt to rub his neck she bit his earlobe. "We can sit out front and wait for you to get done."

Knowing he was out numbered, "Fine we'll all go." At least he wouldn't worry about them being here alone, after everything that had happened yesterday and last night it was probably for the best.

Planting both hands firmly on the table she stood on her own. Lena was determined to stand and walk on her own today. Shaking her head at Gary as he started to stand and help her. "No, just stay there big guy, I'll be fine." Not a hundred percent, but her legs were holding her up without having to lock her knees in place. Lifting her coffee cup she drank the rest of it and placed a hand on Gary's shoulder to keep him in his chair. "I can make it to the sink, so don't get up." Turning slowly, she would do this on her own damn it. The drugs were finally wearing off, Lena could tell by the feel of the muscles in her legs tightening, as she walked slowly to the kitchen sink and rinsed her cup out. "*Hot Damn!*" Lena whispered, she would go bonkers if she had to be completely dependent on everyone else for much longer.

Gary followed her to the kitchen counter to make sure she made it without falling. After a quick glance at his watch he noted the time. They had to leave in the next few minutes in order for him and Stevens to make their meeting on time. "Time to go, if you ladies are coming with us to the Sheriff's office," Lena and Jessica turned toward him at the same time after his comment. Smiling at them both as they gave him the same look that said they hadn't changed their mind about coming.

Stevens shut the dishwasher door and turned it on, dusting his hands off for a job well done. "Ready to roll boss."

Leaning against the counter, Jessica smiled at Gary, "You didn't wipe down the counter tops Stevens." She held the washcloth out to him, with the tips of her fingers. She tilted her head at Stevens, he glared back at her.

"I loaded the dishwasher and turned it on you can wipe the counters down." Stevens stuffed both hands in his back pockets so he couldn't see the washcloth.

Watching Blondie's pretty smile, turn into a sarcastic toothy grin, Gary turned his back like he couldn't bare to watch the outcome of Blondie's will battling against his. Humph, if she thought he would give in to her, she was, "*Damn it, Blondie!*"

Right, he snatched the washcloth from her fingers, wondering if he did a bad job of it would she smack him or do it herself. Somewhat peeved at the idea of doing a bad job at anything, it would serve her right if he did. Stevens thought, walking around Lena to wipe the stove top and counter.

“Make sure you do a good job of it, mom likes her kitchen spotless.” Oh yes turnabout was fair play. Jess decided as she batted her long eyelashes at Gary when he turned around to see what Stevens was doing.

Lena had herself braced against the counter, laughing as she watched Stevens wipe at the stove. “Careful Jess,” No sooner had the words left her lips Stevens threw the washcloth at Jessica hitting her right in the face.

“Oops,” Nodding his head at Blondie, she wasn’t laughing now. “It sort of slipped out of my hand.” Stevens gave her back a big toothy grin as the washcloth landed on the floor at her feet with a wet plop.

Jessica inhaled deeply, causing her nostrils to flare out. She smelled the faint scent of dish soap. Her eyes snapped open, uncovering hot dark sapphire blue of eyes. “You Pig!”

Throwing his hands up he backed up around the island counter, putting it between them. “Now Blondie you need to calm down, no sense in getting you panties in a knot.”

“Laugh it up you two, it won’t be so funny when Mr. Smart ass has his fruit of the looms wrapped around his ears.” Jess would have climbed over the island counter that stood between them, but then she’d have to hike her skirt up around her waist and kick off the six inch stilettos she was wearing to do it, “Why don’t you step around here cowboy?”

Stepping between Jessica and Stevens, “All right children, we don’t have time for this right now. Jessica you can filet him later, after our meeting.” Gary said glancing out the kitchen window behind Lena, he frowned at the lack of sunlight outside. Maybe it was fixing to storm.

Lena turned to see what Gary was frowning at, “Come on we need to go before it starts raining.”

Jessica inhaled deeply to calm herself. Pointing a long red tipped finger at Stevens, “Payback is a bitch, remember that you little peasant.” Gliding over to the chair she had sat in during breakfast,

she picked up her purse and glided out the back door letting it slam shut behind her.

The hot skin searing heat Stevens had seen in Jessica’s eyes before Gary had stepped between them left him feeling dazed and very uncomfortable. He located his hat hanging on the back of the chair stuffed it on his head as Gary carried Lena to the rig. He turned at the sound of Anna entering the kitchen, and smiled back as she smiled at him. “Guess we’re ready to go then.”

Patting Stevens arm as she went through the doorway, “Don’t worry, Jess will calm down quick enough.” At least Anna hoped she would anyway. She had been looking out the window upstairs in her bedroom watching the broodmares graze in the paddocks close to the house when the dark angry clouds suddenly started rolling in fast. She knew then time was turning into a precious commodity not to be wasted. Locking the door behind her, Anna was still thinking about the sparks of anger she had felt when she walked into the kitchen as she turned from the door to see Stevens standing at the bottom of the steps waiting for her with a smile. Smiling back, she wondered if maybe she would be planning two weddings. The thought of both her girls getting married at the same time added a little spring to her step as she walked to the rig, with her hand on Stevens arm where he had placed it. Jessica better watch out, this one could steal her heart before she even knew what had happened.

Sitting in the back seat behind Gary, Jessica rolled her eyes as she watched Stevens take her mom’s hand and place it in the crook of his elbow while he smiled down at her. “He’s such a Pig, quite snickering Lena.”

“It’s funny, I can’t help it.” Lena thought it was very charming the way Stevens had waited at the steps for her mother to walk with her to the rig. “She’s going to drive us nuts with wedding plans, Jessica.” Lena squeezed Jessica’s hand for her to be quiet as Stevens opened the door and helped her mother into the rig.

Anna leaned forward to see Jessica sitting on the other side of Lena, and wiggled her eyebrows at Jess. “It’s going to be a pretty day outside today, don’t you think so Stevens?” Anna asked after he had climbed in the rig and shut the door.

“Yes ma’am, I do.” He said and smiled over his shoulder at all three women sitting in the back seat. He could see Blondie

shooting daggers at him with her eyes, but he didn't look directly at her.

Lena was trying to relax, on the couch, while the little butterflies fluttering around in her stomach continued to make her uncomfortable. Listening, her mom went over the list she had started the minute Gary and Stevens had gone back to Captain Daniels office for their meeting. "Can we get everything done in two weeks? That doesn't seem possible."

"Two weeks is not only possible, it'll be great." Jessica commented with a positive tone from the opposite end of the couch. "Don't worry everything will be fine and after everything that's been happening lately around here, something fun and exciting like a wedding is just what we all need."

Lena hoped so. But still she couldn't shake the restlessness and anxiety that seemed to be crawling around inside her. Something was coming, she could feel it. Watching her mother jot notes down on another page, she tried to relax. They were going shopping, what could possibly happen at the mall, Lena wondered. "*Guard your family, it is your birthright, your duty to the Goddess.*" Oh, hell. Not you again, go away. Lena thought with a pensive faraway look. She didn't notice the two heads, Jessica and her mother's, snapping up or the questioning look from Jessica's direction. Or the distraught but resigned look on her mother's face as they both stared at her.

Captain Daniels stood behind his desk and waited for Wellington and Stevens to be seated. "I'm guessing you two have meet Captain Norman Daytona P.D.?" He asked nodding his head at the other man sitting at the end of his desk.

"Yes, Sir we have. It's nice to see you again, Captain Norman." Gary wasn't surprised by Norman's appearance, since the East Coast Lover serial killer was high profile. Laying the file he had brought with him on the desk. "Inside is everything you need, to connect one of Daytona's businessmen to the killer." Gary waited for one of them to open the file, "Detective Landon from the Tampa P.D., called you Sunday Captain Daniels."

Daniels let Captain Norman open the file, while he continued to look at Wellington. "Yes he did and we've pooled our information. Miss Matthews mother, did you find her?"

"Yes sir, she's out in the waiting area with Miss Matthews and Miss Lane." Captain Norman was going over the papers in the file he had laid on desk. "Everything we've found points to the owner of the Sun Ray Resort and Spa, Bradley Jacobs. The last time we saw him was last Saturday night in Tampa at the club called the Outback. Either him or Miss Matthews Jockey, Alex Sanchez put a lethal dose of equine tranquilizers in Miss Lanes glass of wine. Miss Matthews inadvertently drank all of the contents of that glass, and it nearly killed her." The only outward show of emotion was his eyes. Gary knew the color would be very close to black.

"Do you think this is the person that killed the Deputy at Miss Lane's house?" Detective Wellington's Captain in Atlanta Georgia and him had a long and very interesting conversation about the leave of absence Wellington had taken eight months ago. So naturally Daniels was curious as to know what Wellington thought about the cop killer, were they one in the same.

"That I don't know Sir; you would have to talk to Miss Lane to find out if Mr. Jacobs has been in the shop behind her house."

"I personally drove by the Matthews farm last night and there wasn't any suspicious vehicles parked on the side of the road that I could see."

Gary's gaze slid over to Norman as the man sat back in his chair, he appeared to be finished perusing through the file. "Will that help you in your investigation Captain Norman?"

Pinching his bottom lip he tugged on it as he thought about what he had just read. "First I'd like to know where you got the credit card information, Wellington." Fixing his dark brown eyes on the big man next to Wellington, Stevens hadn't said anything or moved since sitting down in the chair. Slouching in the chair would be a better choice of words he thought. Stevens sat staring at him or Daniels, whichever one was talking.

"An Anonymous informant, Sir. I provided the information so you would know where to look quickly through the proper channels." Turning to Captain Daniels, "Bradley Jacobs threatened Miss Lane and Miss Matthews life last Friday on the phone after our meeting with you. The four of us left here and went straight

back to the farm. I don't believe in coincidences Sir. Bradley Jacobs was seen standing next to our table where our drinks were sitting unattended."

Captain Norman tugged on his bottom lip some more. "Jacobs is the one that called in to complain about some ruckus over at the Rhinestone awhile back, said two big men caused him some problems." Looking closer at Wellington and Stevens, "So, it was the two of you he was complaining about."

Stevens could feel his body tightening at the thought of Jacobs putting his hands on any women. Staring at Captain Norman while the man talked, "Jacobs said he was going to cut Miss Lane into small pieces and feed her body parts to the gators after he got done using her body for his pleasure of teaching her a lesson." Nostrils flaring as he inhaled through his nose, Stevens knew he had both Captain's attention with his cold hard tone.

"Captain Norman, Captain Daniels have you been able to locate Jacobs yet?" It was an attempt to divert their attention away from Stevens, Gary wasn't sure if it would work or if even Stevens was finished talking.

Daniels continued to watch Stevens rein in his temper, the man looked ready to blow several gaskets. "No, the Sheriff's Department and Daytona P.D. are working together to locate the man quickly and quietly as possible. But it seems he has gone to ground, since none of his staff has seen him since last Friday." He watched Stevens jump up from the chair he had been slouched in for the last thirty minutes like his ass had suddenly caught fire. Raising one eyebrow in question, aimed at Stevens hard glare.

Gary kept his gaze on Captain Daniels, "Stevens would you please check on all three of the ladies out in the waiting area."

Stevens raked his cold glare over both of the Captains before turning to the door. "Right!"

Inwardly wincing as Stevens slammed the office door shut behind him on his way out, "Now before Stevens comes back, I'll tell you that Jacobs has been very abusive both physically and mentally to Miss Lane and she has confirmed it, Miss Matthews confirmed that she has seen some of these bruises. We don't talk about it around Stevens, though he may know or have an idea about the abuse."

"What's his relationship with Miss Lane?" Captain Norman inquired.

"You could say he's her personal bodyguard I guess. Stevens came down here with me to help track down the killer. After witnessing two different occasions where Jacobs became aggressive toward Miss Lane, I asked Stevens to keep an eye on her. The day I met with you Captain Norman about the two East Coast Lover victims in Daytona, two of Miss Matthews fillies were injured out at the farm. Someone had pounded two steel rods in to the ground; unfortunately no one saw them before turning out the two fillies. Both incidents happened after the confrontation at the Rhinestone. Miss Matthews received two e-mails, the dates for both are noted in the file, each containing an attachment, which were a picture of Mrs. Cragg after she was murdered, and the other of the two fillies impaled on the rods before anyone could get to them. I had Stevens trace the e-mails at Miss Matthews house, so it was necessary for me to introduce Stevens to the two women. After he traced the two e-mails, Jacobs called and threatened their lives. Miss Lane decided she didn't want to stay at the Matthews farm, so Stevens continued to follow her."

Captain Daniels sat back in his chair and drummed his fingers on his chest as he thought about what had happened. Didn't like it one bit, not one bit at all. "Smart move bringing the women here with you this morning Wellington," He commented as Stevens walked back into the office and reseating himself.

"The women didn't give him a choice, Sir." Stevens stated as he stretched his legs out in front of him, slouching down in the chair.

"Is that right," Smothering his laugh with a cough, Daniels knew the two young ladies were sharp.

A small smile playing around his lips, "Yeah, under the guise of going shopping after our meeting," Gary said and watched Stevens shudder at the word shopping.

Laughing at Stevens reaction, "Ah, nothing like a little shopping with the women folk, ain't that right Daniels?" Captain Norman couldn't help it Stevens had looked like he could be a cold blooded killer fifteen minutes ago, now he shudders at the talk of shopping.

"We won't keep you two any longer, Wellington, Stevens. Call me if anything else happens, and stay close to the women."

Stevens and Gary stood and shook hands with Both Captain Norman and Daniels and left. The office door closed behind them. "You're such a riot Wellington." Stevens grumbled as they walked through the bull pen.

"A little shopping never hurt anyone." Gary chuckled and opened the security door to the waiting area.

"Are you nervous honey, it's natural to feel that way?" Anna turned in her chair at the sound of the security door opening behind her. "Are you all finished with your meeting then, I would like to stop at Macy's first since their having a fabulous sale this week." Stuffing her note pad and pen back into her pocketbook, smiling when she heard Stevens grumble something under his breath.

Shopping didn't really bother him, too much. "We're all finished and ready to go." Winking at Anna he took her hand again placing it in the crook of his elbow, escorting her back to the rig. "Since Macy's is in the mall, why don't we have lunch there in the food court before we leave?" The plan of mentioning lunch at the food court would hopefully keep their mall trekking to an hour and a half, and it was already ten thirty. All most lunch time.

Lena couldn't help but smile at Stevens lunch comment. "Lunch sounds like a wonderful idea, I'm already hungry. Why don't we eat first and then hit the shops in the mall and walk off lunch while we're at it?" Lena asked as Gary sat her in the back seat of the rig, watching the smile tug at the corners of his mouth.

"Good idea." He said and planted a very warm kiss on Lena's smiling mouth before sliding behind the wheel of the rig.

"Hey we just ate a couple of hours ago. We should shop first eat some lunch and finish shopping, that sounds like a better idea." Jessica was in no hurry to head back to the farm. There was something, about the place she had called home for a lot of years that felt like it was pressing in on her. The same as the nightmares she'd been having, dark and feral. She planned to put it off for as long as possible. Stay in town for a lot of retail therapy.

Gary fired up the rig and headed for the mall. Listening to the women in the back seat decide which shops they wanted to go to first. Watching Stevens out of the corner of his eye, Stevens visibly flinched every time one of them said the word shopping. He knew they were doing it just to get a rise out of Stevens, "Sounds like a

good idea, shopping then lunch, and then shopping some more." Chuckling each time he agreed with Lena, Jessica and Anna. Gary was no fool, going against three women especially the one he planned to marry. It would be the makings of misery soup, and he wanted none of that, besides going to the mall they could relax a little. Safety in numbers.

"Traitor," the name didn't have any heat in it. Stevens mind was firmly on the subject of where Jacobs was hiding, there must be something he hadn't been told. Gary sending him out to check on the three ladies had been a ploy to get him out of the room. Of course Wellington knew how volatile his temper could be when set off. "Is anyone going into Victoria Secrets?" He wouldn't mind watching a little modeling of some of those outfits.

Jessica took in the site of the nearly empty parking lot, good they had some time before it would get crowded. "Yes and no we're not modeling for you." She answered as she climbed down out of the rig and slung her purse strap over her shoulder.

Lena slid over to the edge of the seat and down till she was standing on her own before Gary could pick her up to carry her. Holding her hand out to let him know she wanted to walk. "Modeling for him might give us a better idea how it looks to a man Jess, maybe we should model the stuff we try on for him and Gary."

"No way are you modeling for Stevens babe." Gary said shaking his head no, "Nugh ugh, no way no how." Lena laughed as she felt Gary's chest swelled up, like a big gorilla fixing to beat on his chest. She wasn't really going to model for Stevens, but everyone had been poking at him about shopping all the way into town and Lena figured Gary needed a little poking also.

Walking on the left side of Gary keeping him and Lena between her and Stevens, Jessica was going to ignore him until it was time for payback. "Mom we should stop in and look around in the bridal shop they have here."

"Okay, after Macy's, their having a shoe sale. I need another pair of shoes." Then Godiva chocolate, Anna thought. A woman could conquer anything after fortifying herself with the purchase of some great shoes on sale and a couple pounds of great chocolate.

"Hmmm... Yes shoes." Jessica said echoing Anna's first thought.

"Oh god, Godiva chocolate, I've been craving some for two days now." Lena said almost purring the word chocolate.

Arching one brow Gary looked down at Lena watching her lips while she talked. They could take the chocolate home and he could have a chocolate covered Lena all to himself, Gary groaned at the thought of spreading it over her entire body. "Yeah chocolate would be a good idea." He'd make damn sure they got five or six pounds before they left the mall.

Glancing passed Gary to Blondie as they stepped up on the sidewalk. "Can I watch you model the shoes?" Stevens asked.

"Such a swine."

"It's a weakness, I love women's shoes too, especially when their attached to a woman." Opening the door for everyone to go ahead of him, his eyes dropped down to take in the sight of Blondie's bare legs. Her skirt stopped just below mid thigh. *Stevens you're a sick, sick man, need major therapy when you get back home to Atlanta.* Making a mental note to check into it, he followed Anna through the door and into Macy's shoe department.

Gary knew from past experience with his mother not to get between a woman and a pair of shoes on sale or chocolate, it could mean life and death to any man. Strolling over to the vacant couch he figured he could watch them safely from there and not risk getting snarled at for interrupting. He felt better seeing Lena move around more on her own with a stronger step, not a hundred percent, but stronger than she had been this morning. Stretching his legs out in front of him, he crossed them at the ankle to get comfortable. In the past buying shoes could take ten minutes to over an hour. "Might as well get comfortable Stevens we could be right here for awhile."

Yeah, and it was definitely fine by him. Who was he to complain about watching hot women attach hot shoes to their sexy feet? Sighing gratefully, he sank down into the soft sofa next to Gary. Stevens loved women, soft, short, round, tall it didn't matter to him. There was something about each woman that pulled at him. "I don't mind. Where do you think Jacobs is hiding?"

"Not a clue, he'll probably come looking for Jessica sooner or later, I'm betting sooner. What puzzles me is why he's killing the widows, what ties it all together?"

Stevens shrugged his shoulders, "May not be a reason that ties it all together." Trailing off into silence as Lena, Jessica and Anna trooped over to the sofas where he and Gary sat, with three boxes of shoes each to try on.

Lowering herself down on the couch next to Gary, Lena couldn't remember the last time she had went shoe shopping for something other than the next pair of muck boots. Placing the stack of boxes on the floor she lifted the lid of the top box. Peering down into the box, she thought about the content of her closet at home, yep she didn't have a damn thing to match the shoes. Okay so maybe she needed to spruce up her wardrobe a bit with some new outfits, so she could wear something other than her usual jeans and t-shirt. Slipping off her right shoe and sock, she put on a nylon footie and lifted the black sling back with barely there straps and a four inch heel. Hmmm, it would look like she was on top of a black pedestal. Slipping the shoe onto her foot she extending her leg out and held the pants leg up a couple of inches. "What do you think?" Compelled to ask, Lena didn't really care what they thought, she was buying them anyway.

Gary had been too busy until now to notice her toenails where painted something close to burnt Sienna, almost the same color as her long wavy hair. "Very nice, are you getting those?" He hope so, they were hot on her sexy feet.

"Yes." Lena placed the shoe back inside the box replaced the lid and shuffled it to the bottom of the stack, keeping most of her attention on the shoes. Sitting this close with their legs touching, she could feel his body heat through the jean material they were both wearing. Clearing her throat she opened the second box. Lena slipped the shoe on her foot, ah yes; these screamed I want to have hot sweaty gorilla sex. She held her foot out for Gary to see.

"Hmmm... Do you know what shoes like that say?" Slim straps crisscrossed over the foot and lower ankle, the color a deep rich burgundy of an excellent wine.

Stevens gave a low sexy whistle after sucking in some much need oxygen he'd lost when Blondie had slipped on the same kind of heel just a moment ago. "Yummm..."

Gary jabbed Stevens hard in the ribs with his elbow. "Get your eyes off my girl's feet."

“Umpff,” letting out the breath he had just sucked in. “So what’s in the other box Lena?” Jabbing his elbow at Gary’s unprotected ribs he wiggled both eyebrows at Lena, anything to get his mind and other parts of his body off Blondie’s first class legs. She was paying him back alright, sitting across from him with her skirt slithering up above mid thigh hinting at the possibilities. While sliding both feet into a pair of heels exactly like the one Lena had on. Watching her out of the corner of his unruly eye, she stood and strolled away a short distance, pivoting back around and strolling back. If this kept up he wouldn’t need therapy because he’d be dead.

“The other box is a secret Stevens.” Lena put the shoe back in the box with its mate and put the lid back on it. “Okay now I need a couple of new outfits to go with these shoes.” Lena said as she rubbed her damp palms on her thighs in an attempt to dry them. She couldn’t seem to figure out why she suddenly felt very uneasy in her own skin. Threatened, glancing over to watch Jessica stroll back in the burgundy heels. Man Stevens didn’t look so good himself watching Jess walk in those shoes. “What’s a matter Stevens?”

He couldn’t pry his eyes off Blondie’s legs, “Nothing, nope I’m good nothing wrong here.” It was a small lie, but Stevens figured Lena didn’t want to know he was feeling a lot of painful pressure in his jeans.

Anna was having so much fun watching and listening to the banter going back and forth, she didn’t bother to try on her shoes. Poor Stevens she really did feel a little bit sorry for him, with Jessica tormenting him the way she was. She should say something Jess, opening her mouth to do just that she caught the pensive look on Lena’s face. She looked around at the other people and didn’t notice anything unusual going on. Studying Lena’s face closer, Anna frowned at the anxiety she could see in Lena’s darkening green eye. *Just Hell*, Anna thought. “How do you like the shoes you picked out Lena?” Anna hoped to draw her attention away from whatever was pulling at her.

“Their great, I’m getting all three pair. Why don’t we go next door to Mr. Beans and get a coffee or Latte?” She felt aggravated and twitchy all of a sudden, a compulsive driving need to move. “*You must seek safety. Now!*” Lifting the three boxes off the floor

she handed them to Gary, “Can you carry these to the register for me?” She said forcing a small tight smile on lips, she really wasn’t feeling. The nagging voice was a warning and she would heed that warning since she felt the same way.

“Sure if you’re ready to go.” Gary stood next to the couch with all three boxes tucked under one arm so he could help Lena stand. Keeping her hand in his he walked the few remaining feet to the register. “You okay to stand?” Gary asked as he took his credit card out of his wallet and laid it on the counter. “Are your legs getting weak?” She had a strange look on her face, one he had never seen before.

Casting an uncertain glance over her left shoulder at the other people milling around the shoe department, “No, no I’m fine.” There was something vaguely familiar about what she was feeling, but she just couldn’t pin it down. Turning back the clerk gave her the purchase total for her shoes. Lena stuffed her hand into her bag and pulled out her wallet and slid her discover card out and tried to hand it to the lady. She caught Gary shoving his wallet into his back pocket, one of her eyebrows arched in question, “Now why did you do that? I didn’t want you to pay for my shoes.” Damn it she was already uncomfortable as it was.

Gary wrapped his fingers around the handles of the bag containing the shoes. “You can pay me back by wearing them tonight, how’s that?” His lips brushed softly against the top of her ear, and he explained how she could pay him back for the shoe purchase.

Tilting her head slightly gave him better access to her ear, she gladly accepted his way of repayment, “Mmkay.” The twitchy aggravation she’d been feeling seconds ago faded quickly to a heat she understood as they moved aside for Jessica and her mother to pay for their purchases. Lena didn’t give the bad feeling a second thought as she leaned into Gary and kissed him before stepping back from the temptation of his body.

Waiting next to Jessica while the sales clerk rang up her purchase, Anna had her head turned slightly to watch Lena’s facial expressions, her eyes bright and happy as she kissed Gary and stepped back. Then the angry deepening of the green replaced the happiness made Anna blink. Causing her to flinch and watch Lena

with a close eye, she looked around were they stood once again. "Lena are you feeling okay, you look upset?"

She stepped around Gary to stand next to Jessica, "I'm fine, just need a hit of caffeine from next door." The hair on the back of her neck felt prickly like it was standing on end, in her mind she and the owner of the nagging voice were pacing up and down the aisle waiting for the sales clerk to hurry up. Quickly sliding her mother's bag off the counter she shoved it at Stevens. "Carry this would ya, thanks." *Out, they had to get out of this store. Now.* Lena slid her arms around Jess and her mother's waist with a little pressure to move them along quicker.

Lena didn't just feel better body and mind, she felt wickedly strong. Like she could pick Jess and her mom up and carry them both out of the store if that's what it took. She shook her head lightly when Gary looked ready to say something. The men could lead or follow she didn't care as long as they left the damn store. Lena was trying to think of something to chat about as they wound their way through the store. Damn it, she couldn't think right with a monkey on her back. And that's just what it felt like to. Her mind wandered on its own to the racks ahead searching for, for what? Ah just ahead was the main doors to Macy's that lead out into the mall. "Java time," Unaware she had growled it with slight snarling lips.

"Sis you just scared that poor little old lady back there growling and snarling. What gives?" Jessica had decided to wear her new burgundy heels out as an added benefit of tormenting Stevens who was walking behind her. "Lena!" Jessica hissed and felt Lena tighten her arm that was around her waist, digging her fingers into her side making her walk faster.

Fifteen feet, twenty feet max and they would all be out of the hateful store. With each step closer to the exit, she had slipped smoothly from aggravation to flat out mad. "Almost there ladies keep moving."

"You're growling and snarling still, tell me why or I'll stop right here till you fess up, so out with it?" Jessica didn't know if she could make good on her threat to stop right in the middle of the aisle or not. Lena had such a tight hold on her and mom they were walking hip to hip, one miss step and they would be a tangle of arms and legs.

Gary shot a quick look at Stevens and got an, I don't know shrug. Lena was marching Jessica and Anna toward the main section of the mall. "Lena honey, slow down."

Hidden behind the last row of men's clothing racks, Bradley watched Lena march toward the exit. He'd followed them from the farm to the Sheriff's Department and then on to the mall, in his secretary's car. Should've known the stupid worthless jockey wouldn't be able to follow directions, if he had done it right the stinking whore would be dead. Good thing he was gator bait and no longer a screw up for society to support.

Bradley stayed hidden behind the racks so he could follow them and watch until the perfect moment to kill them all one by one. Lena whoring Matthews would be first, while her mother and Jessica was tied up to watch as she died by his hand. In his mind Bradley was screaming while he watched the big muscled up bastard wearing the black cowboy hat, put his filthy hand on Jessica's arm. He took a step forward and caught his self before it was too late, no one had seen him. Now wasn't the time, but soon, he could feel the pounding need to kill again thrumming in his body. Glaring at their backs as they left the store, he promised himself the big cowboy would be first, chopping the arms off first so he couldn't touch someone else's property ever again.

Stevens reached for Jessica's right arm to slow the women down; at the same time Gary tried to grab the back of Lena's t-shirt. "Slow down Blondie, we're not going to a fire are we," He said wrapping his fingers around her upper arm, not tight, but a barely there hold.

Shooting a quick worried look at Stevens, "Hang on a sec," Jessica whispered to him.

Every time he reached for the back of Lena's t-shirt she pulled out of his reach like she had eyes in the back of her head. "Lena, damn it slow down." Gary complained to the ramrod straight back in front of him as they stepped from the store into the main section of the mall. Lena angled to the left of Macy's and headed for the coffee shop next door named Mr. Beans. He couldn't understand what had made her go from happy to snarling and growling her words, since he couldn't see her face. Gary was guessing Lena was

mad about something. Following them through the doorway and into the coffee shop Lena didn't stop until they were standing at the counter to place their order. Letting his impatience be known by the tone of his voice, "Lena, what's gotten into you?"

Lena released her mother's waist to point at the last empty booth over by the wall. "We can sit over there." She commented doing her best not to snarl in her mother's ear. She rolled her shoulders trying to shrug off some of the anger she could feel still vibrating in her body. Feeling bad for literally trotting her mother and Jessica out of Macy's, Lena pulled cash out of her bag and paid for all five coffees. Picking up her Grande Mocha Latte she carried it with her to the booth she had pointed at, someone else could get the change or the kid could keep it as a tip, Lena didn't care.

If it wasn't for Macy's standing between her and the rig she would go outside and smoke a much needed cigarette to help her relax. As it was they would be taking the long way back to the rig because she wasn't stepping foot back in that store. "Sorry about hustling you guys out of the store that way but I needed to sit down and I wanted to do it with a cup of chocolate in my hand." Load of horse shit, but it was the best she could come up with on short notice. And from the looks on everyone's face they thought so too. So she lifted her cup to her lips and took a sip of frothy chocolate and whip cream to make it look like it was what she meant.

He had tried to scoot in next to her and when Lena didn't budge, Gary bumped her over with his hip so he was sitting on the outside edge. Relaxing back on the hard bench with his arm stretched across the top. "Okay that would be understandable if it was the truth. Now why don't you tell us what happen to make you mad?"

Taking a vacant chair from the two-seater table next to them, Stevens angled it toward the doorway at the end of their table. Stevens had already seen the mutinous look on Lena's face, so he was taking the high road and keeping his mouth shut for now. Something in Macy's had set Lena off causing her to exit the store as quickly and quietly as possible. With only one window and one doorway into the front of the coffee shop Stevens could watch the people come and go at Macy's.

Anna wasn't saying anything either. Of course she knew now what had made Lena react so oddly. It was easy to link with Lena and Jessica when they were touching each other. She had only to

absorb their feelings and emotions, and she had stumbled twice under the strength and pressure of Lena's. Anna had seen and felt great power, but what she now knew was inside Lena and Jessica was truly three fold. The feel of it had given her a serious rush before she closed herself off from it. Praying all hell wouldn't break loose anytime in the near future, ending their normal lives. Anna was in no hurry to rush things along, nope she thought, no hurry at all.

"I'm still waiting for the rest of what sent you from Macy's store mad," Be patient, Lena will talk when she calms down. Getting annoyed with her will do you no good, so be patient Wellington. Gary gave himself a pep talk while he stared her in the eye. Was there something different about the green of her eyes? They looked to be a deeper darker green. She didn't seem to be as mad now, but alert. And why would she be alert to the point of being stiff.

How to put in simple terms what she'd felt in the store and not cause alarm? Willing her body to relax she slouched down on the bench. In her mind she and the other, was pacing back and forth next to the table. "I don't know, it felt like someone was staring at my back and it made me mad no big deal." Unless she found the person staring then she would poke their eyes out with the hoof pick in her bag. Then they wouldn't be staring or watching her anymore and it would be even less of a big deal.

She had lived every day simply and uncluttered for the biggest part of twenty five years, and with in just a couple of months that life had been flushed down the toilet and replaced with one complication after another, and big hefty piles of crappy clutter. "That's the gist of it. It's hard to put into words."

Score one for Stevens, he thought smugly to himself. "Did this start in the shoe department?" Stevens asked casually, while keeping his focus on the door and window in front of him.

"Yeah, when Jessica was taking her new shoes for a test ride," Lena let go of an irritable sigh, making it sound more like a heavy huff of breath, and gave up on trying to relax since it wasn't working.

"Honey we can go home if you don't want to shop," Procrastination at its best right. If they left the mall then Lena wouldn't feel the pressure of the dark, therefore Anna thought

putting off the inevitable until a later date. This sounded like a great idea to her.

"No mom it'll be fine, we can finish shopping. I'm not letting anyone run me off from the damn mall at least not until I have ten pounds of Godiva in my possession." No, Lena was done running and hiding from who ever had been playing mind games with her and trying their level best to kill her off. Probably Bastard Brad, coward that he is, it be just like him to hide in the clothes racks while she walked by. Dickless wonder, maybe she should go back into Macy's and get those outfits she needed to go with her shoes and while she was perusing the racks she could hunt that spineless shit down and squash him like a bug.

"Let's go back to Macy's and finish shopping; I still need new outfits to go with the shoes I just bought."

Jessica removed the lid from her cup to sip at it while she kept her own council; she listened to their unspoken thoughts. One fine arched eyebrow shot up as she heard Anna cuss very eloquently while smiling and nodding her agreement of Lena's suggestion about going back into Macy's. Jessica had been looking at Lena while she talked, so Lena would think the eyebrow was meant for her like a question.

There would be bruises where Lena had gripped her by the waist and herded her and Anna out of the store, Jess wasn't signing up for round two. "You need to get her a ring Gary, I vote for ring shopping."

"I'll second that vote." Anna said making short work of her small regular coffee.

"Come on I still need three new outfits and the sale is in Macy's." The more she thought about going back in there the better she liked the idea. She'd bet a month's salary Bastard Brad was in that store right now.

"We'll go back to Macy's after you have a big hunk of stone on your finger and not before. Right mom?" Jessica was clearly joining ranks with their mom.

Standing up from her seat with Stevens help, "Thank you Stevens, that's right Lena not until you have a ring on your finger," Anna said and dropped her empty cup in the trashcan at the end of the service counter.

"RH and Sons Jewelers at the other end of the building should have just what we're looking for." Gary laced his fingers between hers and gave her a little tug to get her moving.

Okay, maybe the rat bastard would follow them around the mall and she'd find him that way. "Alright, alright already, quit tugging on me."

"If you're tired I could carry you." Gary said and let go of her hand to drape his arm over her shoulders, keeping her at his side.

Following her mother out of Mr. Beans Lena was hoping for a confrontation. "Actually I feel great, the drugs have worn off." Tired was at the other end of the spectrum, she felt; well wicked was still the first to come to mind, then revved or pumped ready for action. Her skin felt tight like it was two sizes too small. Kicking that rat bastards face in could only improve her mood. Lena visualized her uncharted ass kicking techniques while they all trooped to the other end of the mall for a ring. It was almost funny how they had opted for ring shopping over Macy's sale. Narrowing her eyes at Jessica and her mother's back, walking in front of her, Gary and Stevens. Where they up to something? Maybe not Jess but her mother was real sneaky about medaling in Lena's life. "Did Captain Daniels or Norman have any idea where Bradley was?"

Gary was surprised it had taken her so long to question the meeting at the Sheriff's Department. "No, why do you ask?" There was a reason Lena was asking all he had to do was wait her out.

"Just wondering, do you think Brad will come after Jessica?" She looked up at Gary as she asked the question. Feeling alert and comfortable at the same time with her arm wrapped around his waist. She played with his belt loop on the other side. The crowd in the main part of the mall was growing thicker as they walked past the fountain under a leaded glass dome with its water shooting straight up into the air about twenty feet, marking the center of the building. Still it was mostly senior shoppers this time of morning.

"It's possible, and then again Jacobs may take off."

That would be a bummer, to be cheated out of some serious payback. Bastard Brad had maimed, and nearly killed two of her horses, tried to kill her, corrupted her jockey and abused her sister Jessica. Not to mention the e-mails and the phone calls scaring her out of her mind. Yeah she owed him big time. Lena thought with a wicked smile as they walked into the jewelers shop.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It boggles the mind how your life can change so drastically from one day to the next. With the end of April sneaking up on her, Lena thought over the events of the last six months of her life. October 31, she and Jessica had celebrated their 25th birthday and a serial killer named by the media, The East Coast Lover had taken the life of his fourth victim. Then her thoroughbred race horse trainer up and decides to retire and one of the grooms quit, and moved to Kentucky. Okay so that's not so much of a big deal, since her and the trainer were more of a team than boss and employee. Mean while, Anna her mother was sneaking around like a thief in the night setting up approved blind dates that show up at odd times and ask to take her out to dinner.

That covered the months of December, January and the first half February. Then Mr. Gary Wellington shows up on her doorstep. Greek Adonis, every woman's dream man wanting to work on a horse farm. So she was lead to believe for a few short weeks. Of course her mother, ever the sneaky match maker, thought this was great.

Mrs. Cragg, one of her mother's long time friends was murdered, and then two of her fillies were maimed by an unknown psycho that felt the need to share some of his experiences with e-mails and prank calls. And Mr. Tall Dark and Sexy was making his play during all of the chaos.

After coming close to meeting her maker in a permanent way one short week ago, Lena had a new lease on life equipped with new philosophy. Pryor to the last six months she kept life simple and uncluttered, every day was pretty much same as the one before. Since then her life has been High Balling like a runaway train down the Auto bond to hell with a chauffeur.

Today now half over with, had been busy iced with strange. Engaged, who would have thought she would actually step into the land of the committed.

Finally back home from the mall, Lena plopped down on the couch with a sigh of relief. Three hours of shopping at the mall wore her out faster than a full day of back breaking work around the farm. But the ring on her finger and the three pairs of shoes was worth it.

In two weeks she would be getting married, Oh god. Glancing down at the ring again, she had been joking when she pointed at the biggest gaudiest looking ring in the case. 5 ct. diamond surrounded by emeralds, on her small hand it didn't look gaudy now, just big. Since the jeweler Mr. Hunt had slipped in on her finger Lena hadn't been able to stop smiling.

"You'll go blind if you keep staring at it." Sitting at the other end of the couch with her feet tucked under her, Jessica thought it was cute how Lena had been smiling like a fool for the last hour.

"Getting cold feet yet?"

"Hell no, I was just thinking maybe we should move the wedding up a bit so Gary doesn't have time to change his mind." She knew he was in the kitchen with Stevens.

Gary smiled as he walked into the living room with three glasses of sweet tea. He handed Jessica and Anna their drinks, before sitting down next to Lena. "I never change my mind, and I'm not going to start now. But if you want to move up the wedding that's fine with me."

One down and one to go Anna thought, while writing down the names of friends they were going to invite. Taking a quick tally, "Please don't move it up, the guest list is already up to about two hundred people and that's not everyone. The list of people living in Georgia will need some time to make plans if they're able to come."

This seemed like an excellent time to go to the barn and check on things. "Stevens and I will be in the main barn if you ladies need anything." He didn't mind being in on the planning stages of his wedding, but when it came time for Q's and A's, he would gladly hang back.

Lena watched Gary stand and walk into the kitchen, couple seconds later she heard the screen door bang shut. "Can you believe that, he just up and left the coward." Wiggling her ring from side to side, she noted an odd sensation tingling up her arm from where the ring was. She had been looking at Jess when she

had spoken, but Jessica wasn't looking up at her, she was staring oddly down at the ring. Lena glanced down at the ring wondering why it would put such an odd look on Jess's face. *Just Hell*, her bling, bling ring was freaking glowing.

Damn it. Blinking several times didn't seem to help. The damn thing was getting brighter as a matter a fact. "Ughmm, mom?" Lena's eyebrows slammed together as a surge of hot unbridled anger rocked her body, she jumped up from the couch like she was spring loaded. Her feet planted apart, she felt eager to do battle. *To Protect.*

Raising her head slowly, Anna missed the uncertainty in Lena's voice. "What honey?" Her eyes moved even slower. She visibly flinched from being startled by Lena jumping up from the couch like a jack in the box. *Oh Hell not again*, not now damn it she had a wedding to plan. The bright light coming from next to Lena's hip caught her attention. She was unable to see what was causing the hip of Lena's jeans to light up, but she had pretty good idea. Lena raised and flexed her left hand making a fist. Anna stated her aggravation, "*Damn it!*"

"This may sound like a really dumb question, but why is your ring glowing like it's plugged into the wall socket Lena?" Jessica almost felt like smiling since she wasn't the only one with strange things happening to her. Pursing her lips, she raised one brow at her mother saying a cuss word. "And that was for?"

Whirling on Jess and her mother, "How can you sit there all calm and relaxed, can't you feel it?" Rolling her head from side to side, popping her neck. The ring on her finger pulsed with each beat of her heart. Unable to stand still Lena paced from the couch to the fire place. It was happening again, the need to protect her family and move them to safety, it was nearly overwhelming. Riding beside it like an exact twin and a lot stronger, was the need to stand and fight.

Turning once again from the fireplace Lena headed for the front door, snarling at the strap her foot was tangled in. Bending down to untangle the strap of Jessica's bag from around her ankle, the door bell chimed echoing through the house. Lena's eyes snapped to Lela, lying on the floor next to Jessica's feet. Straightening up with the bag in her clutched fist, the doorbell chimed a second time.

"Oh for heaven's sake, I'll answer it." Anna said and slapped the tablet down on the table next to her chair. She walked quickly through the foyer to the door, making a mental note to call the florist to check on a sweet pea center pieces for the tables at the reception.

Seeing the worried look on Jessica's face as she took a firm hold on Lela's collar, she whispered, "Who is it?" Lena couldn't see the down the front hall to the door since she was on the other side of the coffee table. But even without looking she knew who it was, and only by a slim chance could she be wrong. With her mom answering the door, Lena prayed she was wrong.

Anna pulled the front door open with a welcoming smile in place. She was so engrossed in thoughts of planning the wedding, "He..." Her greeting cut off as a closed fist slammed into the side of her face. A muffled scream escaped as she fell backwards on to a table, both her and the table crashed to the floor. Anna heard sounds of wood splintering before darkness closed in on her.

Adrenaline pumping hard and fast made his breath heave in and out of his lungs. "Where is she, I know Jessica's here?" Bradley demanded, glaring, insanely, down at the woman he had punched in the face expecting her to answer him.

Lena tossed Jess her bag without looking when she heard the loud crash in the foyer.

Jessica shoved her hand into the bag and pulled out her gun. "Lena call Gary, Now." Jess said tossing the cordless over to Lena on the other side of the coffee table, as she heard heavy footsteps on the tile in the foyer, coming closer. Releasing the safety on the gun, she stood with her legs spread pointing her gun at the doorway in her left hand while holding Lela's collar with her right.

Eye's focused on the doorway between the foyer and the living room, the cordless phone bounced off the side of the coffee table and on to the carpet next to Lena's booted foot.

Lela's vicious growls turned to deep angry barking. "I think mom's hurt." Lena said without taking her eyes off the doorway. Her feet were rooted to the spot where she stood. Something was happening to her body.

“Don’t come any closer Bradley.” Jessica demanded, one finger curled around the trigger, ready to pull. Rock steady with a deadly gleam in her eye, as Lela settled into a deadly growl, making her entire body vibrating. Jessica knew if she released Lela’s collar, she would lunge for Bradley’s throat.

Lena stepped around the end of the coffee table so she was facing the one man she hated with a burning passion. Her feet finally obeying her command to move. “Bastard Brad, Are you surprised to see me?”

Bradley could hear someone else talking, but it was like a buzzing sound in his ears. “We’re leaving Jessica, let’s go.” Standing in the doorway of the living room with his hands fisted. “You’re coming with me Jessica. Put that gun down and shut that mongrel up. You would never shoot anyone with a gun.” Bradley said stepping into the living room.

Taking a slow cautious step closer to the end table in front of her, Lena reached for the hoof pick lying close to the edge with her left hand, not daring to take her eyes off the psycho on the other side of the couch.

“No, I’m not going anywhere with you. We’re through Bradley, leave before you get into more trouble.” Jessica said backing up a step as he started toward her with the couch between them. “Don’t come any closer or I will shoot you.”

“You dare to talk to me like that, telling me not to come closer.” Bradley yelled before lunging over the back of the couch, with his arms stretched out reaching for her long hair. His face contorted in rage at her defiance.

“No.” Lena and Jessica screamed at the same time, as he lunged at Jessica over the couch. Lena was blinded by a flash of light that shot from her ring to the gun in Jessica’s hand. The gun discharged, with a deafening crack that echoed off the living room walls. His big hands latched onto Jess by the hair and she pulled the trigger. The gun discharged again. Lela jumped up clamping her big powerful jaws onto Bradley’s forearm. The momentum sent the three of them falling backward crashing to the floor, causing Jessica’s finger to jerk on the trigger of the gun firing it again. Lela ripped and yanked the coat sleeve off Bradley’s arm along with pieces of his shirt caught in her big teeth.

Hurdling over the coffee table toward Jessica, hoof pick forgotten in her right hand, the ring on her left glowing with the pulse of a heartbeat. “Oh my God. Oh god, Jessica are you okay?”

Jessica struggled to free herself, from Bradley’s heavy body pinning her to the floor. “Lela Down!” Jess issued the sharp command for Lela to stop biting and ripping at Bradley.

He was lying on top of her dead; at least she thought he was dead. She shoved and tried to roll to the side at the same time. She heard the sound of running footsteps coming toward them. “Get him off, get him off of me.” She felt something wet seeping through the front of her shirt. Sobbing as tears ran unchecked from the corners of her eyes into her hair. “Please get him off of me.”

“LENA!” Her name ripped from Gary’s lips in terror that something had happen to her. He ran through the kitchen into the living room and two Deputies barreled into the house from the front door. The sound of the three gun shoots he’d heard before he could make it to the kitchen door, where still reverberating around in his head.

“In here Gary. Oh god, help me get him off of her.” Lena yelled both hands fisted full of material on the back of Bradley’s jacket trying to pull the lifeless body off Jess. Suddenly hands were gripping her by the shoulders and turning her. Lena opened her mouth fixing to scream in protest at the interference and realized it was Gary. Shuddering in relief, she turned to watch Stevens grab Bradley’s lifeless body and tossed it aside like a sack of garbage.

Face grim and set, he searched Jess for holes. “Are you hurt?” Stevens asked his lips tight, barely moving, his voice hard and demanding.

“I don’t think so; no I’m not hurt, maybe sore from the fall.” Jessica looked down at her white t-shirt to see why it was wet. Red, her t-shirt had a big wet red spot that covered most of the front. “Is that blood? Of course it is.” She answered herself and felt something tug at her left hand. Jessica looked down at her hand, to see Stevens trying to pry the gun from her fingers.

“Where the hell did you get this, let it go Blondie?” He asked gently prying her fingers loose and sat the gun aside after flipping on the safety.

“I told you last night I had a gun.”

"I didn't believe you. I know I should have, here let's get you up." Stevens glanced over at the big dog sitting quietly, next to Jessica with a long piece of material hanging out of her mouth.

She waved his hands a way, "I'll just sit here for a few minutes, is mom okay?"

Jessica looked over at the deputy standing next to Stevens. "Your mom is being checked by the paramedics that followed us in ma'am. Can you tell me what happened in here?"

Seeing Lena cradled in Gary's lap, sitting on the couch. Jessica laid her forehead on her knees and told the deputy what happen. She pulled Lela into her lap the best she could, and buried her face in the big dog's soft fur as she slid the coat sleeve out of her mouth then handed it to the deputy.

It was over, Bradley was dead, and she wouldn't have to live in fear of him anymore. Lifting her head up as Stevens scooped her off the floor and plopped her down on the couch, next to Gary. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it, Blondie. I'll check on Anna then get you a drink; you look like you could use it." Now that his heart wasn't jack hammering in his chest, Stevens could find something to block out the thoughts of all the blood on her t-shirt.

"Miss, your mother is asking for you. She needs to be taken to the hospital and checked but she's refusing to go." The paramedic said standing in the doorway between the foyer and living room.

Gary carried Lena into the foyer. He didn't intend to let Lena out of his reach anytime soon. Gently, he let her legs down so she could stand, keeping a supporting arm around her shoulders.

Sitting up and leaning against the wall, Anna was holding an ice pack to her throbbing cheek. "I'll be fine," She said waving her free hand at any protests. "No trips to the hospital needed. Some aspirin will do the trick."

"Are you sure mom?" Lena knew her mom hated hospitals as much as she did.

"Yes, I'll be fine."

"You could have a concussion Anna." Squatting down in front of her, Gary could see a bruise was already noticeable on her cheek.

"I don't have a concussion."

Standing back up, "We'll take her in later if she needs to go." He said and nodded to the paramedic. "We need to get you out of the

foyer." Gary picked Lena back up to cradle her against his chest, and kiss the end of her nose. "Stevens, bring Anna into the kitchen."

All ready bending down Stevens scooped Anna off the floor before Gary had asked. "All ready on it."

"Put me down young man, I can walk just fine." My, my, mentally patting her chest such handsome men.

"Mrs. Matthews you're a lovely arm full," Stevens wiggled both eyebrows at her and deepening his southern drawl, "And very beautiful. It's a real pleasure for me to carry you." Stevens said and sat her down gently in the kitchen chair next to Lena.

Lena was holding her head in her hands with her elbows braced on the table. Five hours after Bradley punched her mom in the face, attacked Jess and Jess shooting Bradley. The detectives and sheriff deputies have finally left, on the heels of the medical examiner as they wheeled the body out with them.

Her mom had moved right back into wedding planner mode after taking some aspirin. Her lists had lists of their own and the menu for the wedding had already been set. She decided to wait until after the wedding to talk to her mother about the dreams and the other weird things going on.

Lena looked around the kitchen table; Gary sat on her right, relaxed in his chair like he had nothing else in the world to do, and there hadn't been a person killed in the living room earlier today. Lena guessed after being a Homicide Detective for ten plus years you got use to it.

On her left, was Jessica at the end of the table, tapping her fingernails on the tabletop, looking from her to Gary and back, paying no attention to Stevens. She wished Jess could find someone to love and love her in return. Having just found true love herself, it was great. The sparks fly when Jess and Stevens were in the same room. Maybe with a little time Jess would open to the possibilities of love again.

Directly across from her, Stevens was still flirting with her mother making her giggle and blush. Lena laced her fingers with Gary's; she noticed Stevens look at Jess out of the corner of his eye, to make sure, Jessica hadn't run off.

Free Sample

CHAPTER ONE

The dark was closing in, swallowing everything in its path. *Run, I have to escape*, but to where? There was no place to hide. Where was everyone? Her lungs heaved with strain and fear. The muscles in her legs started to burn from running flat out in the soft deep sand. She didn't notice the change from sand to pavement until she stumbled falling to her hands and knees. She jumped up and took off again. She could hear the hard slap of her shoes on the pavement, as she left the sandy beach and the crashing waves behind, and the thundering beat of her heart. *Faster, I can't stop or he will kill me.*

The wind howled and blew against her chest trying to push her back to keep her from escaping. Jessica cut down the next alley hoping to hide so she could catch her breath. The dark was thick like a black shroud thrown over the city of Dayton. The burning stitch in her side had her doubling over behind a dumpster gasping for breath. Okay, think Jess what in the hell is going on here? Bending at the waist with her hands on her knees, she had to calm down and think it was the only way she was going to escape.

A low rumbling sound coming from the entrance to the alley spread out all around her echoing off the sides of the two buildings. Still bent over at the waist, she felt the ground beneath her feet begin to vibrate, tremble and heave, the rumbling sound rose to a deafening level. Pavement cracked, and ripped, the dumpster next to her bounced, clanking its metal lids against its sides. Earthquake, Florida didn't have earthquakes, did it?

Jessica braced a hand on the side of the building to keep from being pitched over face first onto the ground. She watched in horror as a putrid oily Black fog seeped up from the gaping crack in the pavement. The smell so vile she slapped a hand over her mouth and gagged. It rose up in front of her blocking the alley

entrance, slowly rolling toward her. She was trapped. The other end of the alley was closed off by a twelve foot cement block wall.

She screamed for help and backed away as far as she could. She had her back pressed firmly against the brick wall, her heels scraping along the bottom with each step she took away from the black fog. She felt something wrap around her ankles and pull. She took a step forward to keep her feet under her and not fall. She couldn't see her feet.

With each step forward she took it moved back leading her toward the yawning mouth of the big gapping crack. A black abyss with an acrid stench she had never smelled before. The closer she got it began to boiled up around her. Another blood curling scream ripped from her throat. The glass in the windows shattered into lethal tiny shards overhead. The sound ripping through her brain as needle sharp points of the glass rained down on her, pricking her skin. Flinging her arms out to the side she tried to find something to grab onto as she was pulled further down into the stinking black crater.

Jessica's terrified scream echoed in Stevens mind. He raced up the stairs taking them three at a time to her bedroom. Not bothering to knock he shoved the door open. Swearing at the pitch black darkness of the bedroom he flipped the light switch on, on the wall, "Holy hell, Jessica wake-up." He yelled making his way to the bed.

He ducked as books and other objects flew around the room. Stevens grabbed Jess by the shoulders and a book thumped him on the back of the head. The bed began to bounce. "Fuck this, damn it Blondie wake up." He snatched her off the bed covers and all and shook her. Her arms swung out trying to fight him off. "Come on Blondie cut it out, wake up damn it."

Stevens closed his eyes tight blocking out the sight of everything floating and zinging around the room. *Not possible Stevens you're having a bad dream and when you wake up you will still be on the couch down in the living room.* Tightening his hold on Jess, he pressed the side of her face to his chest. Of course when you wake up Blondie won't be in your arms either, pressed against you with her little night shirt rubbing against your bare chest.

Feeling Jessica shutter in his arms, Stevens opened his eyes to see everything floating around the room crash to the floor. *"Shit, it's not a nightmare Stevens."*

Jessica turned her head and wrapped her arms around his shoulders and pressed her face into Stevens neck, breathing him in as she tried to calm her racing heart. The loud crashing sound of things falling to the floor and glass shattering made her body jerk, "Not again, please tell me it didn't happen again." Jessica didn't want to open her eyes because she knew what the bedroom would look like.

"Again, what do you mean tell you it didn't happen again?" Stevens glanced over at the door he had left open to see Gary and Lena standing there both with a shocked look on their face.

Easing her self-back from Stevens arms, Jessica had hoped by staying at the farm with Lena, Gary and her mom things would be normal again. No more nightmares or waking to the sound of things thudding and shattering as they fell to the floor. Obviously, it didn't matter where she stayed or lived since it had happened again. Only, now she would have to explain something she herself didn't even understand.

"This is the sixth time this has happen. I had hoped by staying here at the farm it wouldn't happen again, that maybe it was my house." Jessica opened her eyes looking straight into Stevens eyes before glancing over at Lena and Gary standing in the doorway. She didn't bother looking around her bedroom, she already knew it looked like a tornado had just hurled through ransacking and smashing everything in its path.

"I know what I saw when I flipped on the light in here Jess, are you saying this has happened before?" Stevens had arrived yesterday morning hoping he would have sometime before seeing Jessica again. He had called her twice in the last six months, and both times she had said everything was great, and she was real busy ending the call quickly. Stevens had wondered if she was seeing someone else after talking to her both times, which made him mad so he hadn't called her anymore.

He had talked to Gary and Lena almost weekly over the last six months. The only thing he heard about Jess was that she had moved back home and was doing fine, until Lena called him at

home two nights ago asking him to come back, Jessica was in trouble.

"Yes that's what I'm saying and I can't explain it."

"Blondie you were having one hell of a nightmare when I barged in here after I heard you screaming for help."

Jess didn't want to talk about it, she wanted to clean up her room and take a shower. The look in Stevens eyes and the set of his stubborn jaw said it would be awhile before she would be able to do either. "I need to clean this mess up, Gary take Lena back to bed she needs her rest."

"I'm not going back to bed; I'll go get a broom and dust pan to help you clean up the broken shards of glass on the floor. Stevens put her on the bed and don't let her off until I get back with the broom."

"Babe, you shouldn't be traipsing up and down the stairs at three o'clock in the morning stay here, and I'll get it." Gary headed down the stairs not waiting for an answer either way. He'd be damned if he let his pregnant wife run up and down the stairs.

Gary was so cute the way he hovered over Lena. Jessica secretly envied Lena, her being pregnant and her attentive husband. Even though he seemed to have developed, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder after Lena had told him he was going to be a daddy. Her arms were wrapped around Stevens neck still and her feet were not touching the floor.

He shifted her weight to his left arm and caught her legs at the back of the knee with his right lifting them, cradling her against his chest. He knew he had missed her sassy tongue, sparring with her had been fun. But he had missed more than that in the last six months he realized. Even though she had a bad case of bed head going on and her eyes were puffy from sleep she was still beautiful to him. He turned and put her on the bed close to the middle.

Scooting to the edge of the bed she untangled herself from the sheet and blanket, "Lena you don't have to help clean this mess up, I'll get it." She felt crowded with Stevens standing next to the bed towering over her. She looked around the room, looked everywhere but at him.

Stevens didn't like how pale Jessica was; taking her chin in his hand he turned her face toward him so he could look closely at her eyes. She looked thinner than he remembered from six months ago.

“You haven’t been sleeping well lately, have you, and you’ve lost weight too?”

“Would you go away and take your questions with you. Doesn’t this weird you out Stevens, walking into a room and seeing things flying around that shouldn’t be able to fly.” She wanted to crawl into Stevens lap close her eyes and wish it all away. Jessica had missed him over the last six months and both times, he had called, she wanted to tell him everything but couldn’t get the words passed her lips. She glanced around her bedroom again; really it wasn’t too bad, not like the last five times at her own house. Thank God, she didn’t have as much stuff here.

All nine drawers of her dresser were sticking out empty. Her clothes that had been in the dresser litter the floor around the room. The doors to the closet next to the dresser stood wide open and Jessica knew she had closed them both before going to bed last night.

The two perfume bottles she’d had on the dresser were now shattered on the floor making the room smell. And the books she had left in the bookcase when she had moved were tossed all over the floor. Both of the latter back chairs she kept against the wall were broken and lying in the middle of the floor. “How do you expect someone to sleep well when they wake up to this?” Jess said as she waved a hand at the room in general.

“Here’s the broom Stevens, I’m taking my wife back to bed, see you both in the morning.”

“I need to help Jess clean this mess up, Gary.” Lena said.

“No, you need to come back to bed and snuggle with your husband.” Gary wrapped his arm around Lena’s waist, drawing her away from the door as he nuzzled her neck. “Besides she has Stevens to help her if she needs it.”

Jess waved a hand at the door, “Gary’s right, go on back to bed Lena. We’ll see you in the morning.”

“It’s nice to be included Blondie, does this mean I get to sleep in the bed with you?” The thought of lying next to her was so potent it made him shutter with six months worth of suppressed emotions.

He had tried not to think of her and failed. She had dogged his thoughts day and night. He told himself it was just infatuation nothing serious. She was beautiful, smoking hot, that’s what it was. He should stay away and he would get over whatever it was ailing

him. She didn’t need another over bearing man in her life right now. Jessica needed time to heal. The last man in her life had abused her.

He was still determined to keep his distance. At best they could be friends. At a young age he had vowed to never let a woman get close enough to break his heart. Until he had met Jessica he had managed to keep his heart whole.

He felt like a caveman around her. Big burly man wanting nothing but her undivided attention and he didn’t understand any of it. Even after six months of staying away he had no viable answer. He had thrown himself into work like a man possessed determined to pry her and all she made him feel out of his heart and mind. He had failed. Standing next to her bed Stevens knew at that moment that he had failed.

Locking eyes with Stevens, Jessica had wondered last night why he had shown up after being gone for six months and only calling her twice in all that time. To have someone to hang onto in the night when the world around her was going hell, it was very tempting, but she couldn’t risk Stevens being hurt in the fall out with flying objects zinging around her room. “Don’t hold your breath cowboy.”

Hoping to change the subject Stevens went to get the broom Gary had left leaning against the doorway. Blondie was going to tell him what was going on or he wasn’t leaving her room. Turning to tell her just that, in time to see Jessica step down on a shard of glass and cut her foot.

“Damn it Jess stay on the bed until I get the glass cleaned up.” He said carefully making his way back to the bed. She sat back on the edge holding her foot in her hand. He bent down and took her foot in his hand to see how bad she was cut.

Grinding her teeth together at the pain in the heel of her left foot, he raised it to look, “There’s no glass in it, let go it’ll be fine in a second.” This she knew from the experiences of the last five times she had also stepped on broken glass. So much for the hope of being here at the farm and not having to worry about another episode of flying objects.

“And you know this how?”

There was a small indention in the center of her heel where the glass had pressed into it. Rubbing his thumb over it checking for a

sliver of glass, he wiped away the little pin point drop of blood. Letting go of her foot he stood and swept the glass away from the edge of the bed working his way around the room making a pile of glass, books, clothes and other things in the center of the bedroom floor, with each sweep he made the pile grew bigger. "Is your room always like this when you wake up?"

Jessica was sitting cross-legged on the bed watching Stevens sweep her bedroom floor, he was so cute helping, she wanted to hug him and never let go. Don't go there Jessica, he'll leave again and then where will you be?

"Yeah, only this time it's not as bad because there isn't as much stuff here as what I have at home." Maybe she should let him sleep in her bed, maybe it wouldn't happen again if someone else were there.

Standing next to the pile, he had swept up in the middle of the room; he waited for her to go into detail. Yeah like that's going to happen without prying it out of her. She was so pale it made her look as fragile as the broken glass on the floor next to his feet.

Stevens had stayed away hoping to return to his life in Atlanta Georgia, as he knew it; pre-Blondie. That was how he thought of life now because the last six months sucked without her in it. Snubbing her nose at him and his comments, or just being in the same room with her, *Stevens you are a sick, sick man*, he thought to himself. He turned off the bedroom light and walking around the pile to the side of the bed and sat down next to her.

"Move over Blondie I'm camping here until morning." He didn't wait for her to answer figuring she would probably argue about him sleeping next to her. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her up to the pillows in the center of the bed, so he was on the outside.

"This is not a good idea, you know." Jessica commented. He wasn't wearing a shirt. She had been watching his muscles ripple as he swept the floor. God he was warm, it was like being wrapped in an electric blanket she thought sighing to herself. Snuggling deeper into the pillow and up against Stevens warm body, she was so exhausted from lack of sleep over the last few months she never even thought about arguing and fell asleep.

Stevens wasn't use to actually sleeping, literally with a woman lying next to him. Moving slightly to ease some of the discomfort

his jeans were causing him. *Think man, think of something else besides the warm body curled up against you. Blondie needs sleep not your lusty thoughts Stevens. Who would have thought she liked to snuggle?* Damn sure wouldn't have been him. Tormenting himself he wondered who she'd been snuggling up with for the last six months. Bad idea to let your thoughts go in that direction, he'd have to kill someone then for touching her. Okay, so let's make a list of questions to ask Blondie first thing in the morning. *When had all this started, nightmares and objects flying around the room while she was sleeping? How can the stuff fly around anyway, it's just not possible or it shouldn't be?*

He tried to focus on relaxing his body and going to sleep. Blondie slipped her hand into his and tucked it between her firm breasts. He groaned to himself as the thought of her firm breasts stuck in his brain like a thorn.

The soft mists of sleep slowly retreated, Jessica realized she was holding someone's hand with hers and that same someone was breathing on her neck. It's not a bad feeling she decided, scooting back a little more snuggling against the warm body.

Warm body, there's a warm body next to her in her bed, when did it get there and who? Jess thought sleepily as her heart rate began to speed up and fear made her freeze in place. He's back, oh god its Bradley-he's come back, she whimpered softly at the thought of being helpless against the monster that had terrorized her for so long.

Blondie's soft whimper snapped Stevens out of a sound sleep. "Blondie, come on babe wake up," His voice gruff from only being half a wake. He propped himself up on his elbow so he could see her face, frowning he noticed how stiff she was holding herself. "Blondie wake up."

Blondie, Stevens oh god it's Stevens not Bradley, Bradley was dead and gone. Rolling over she wrapped her arms around Stevens warm, hard body and pressed her face to his neck.

"Give me a minute; I thought you were someone else." Easing herself back and propping her head up on the pillow so she was looking into sleepy green eyes. It wasn't the most comfortable position to be in with his arm under her ribs and her arm pinned to the bed by his hard body.

They were chest-to-chest and hip to hip with their legs tangled together. Watching his eyes focus on her lips she felt another part of his hard body throb against her lower abdomen, sending an answering heat surging through her body. Mmmm...

"I guess you're awake now. Who did you think I was?" Stevens didn't dare look her in the eye or there would be no going back.

About the Author

Denise Harvey lives in Oklahoma with her husband and canine buddy Domino. She loves cooking, gardening and spending time with family and friends.

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