

The background of the cover is a painting of a woman with voluminous, fiery red hair that appears to be made of flames. She has large, feathered angel wings, some of which are visible at the top and sides. She is wearing a dark, sleeveless top with a complex, paisley-like pattern. Her expression is serious and contemplative as she looks directly at the viewer. Her hands are clasped near her chin.

VALMORE DANIELS

ANGEL  
FIRE

FALLEN ANGELS - BOOK 1

# Angel Fire

## Fallen Angels – Book 1

by Valmore Daniels

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## Chapter One

*Quia ecce Dominus in igne veniet, et quasi turbo quadrigæ ejus: reddere in indignatione furorem suum, et increpationem suam in flamma ignis.*

*(For behold the Lord will come with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind, to render his wrath in indignation, and his rebuke with flames of fire.) – Isaiah 66:15*

**I woke to** a world of fire and ash.

Forcing my eyes open, I willed the fog in my brain to lift. My lungs screamed for air, and I opened my mouth to breathe, but thick smoke clawed at my throat. Gasping with the effort, I somehow managed to get my arms under me and raise my head up off the floor.

Through the curtain of hair in front of my face, my eyes were drawn to the wedding band glowing white hot on the charred carpet, but the roaring fire dragged my attention away at once.

The plaster walls of my basement apartment peeled and melted under the rage of the inferno. Crackling and snapping in protest, the cheap pine coffee table in front of me collapsed. The fabric and cushions of the oversized couch were entirely consumed, leaving nothing more than the crumbling black skeleton of its wooden frame.

Intense heat washed against my skin as fire chewed at the edge of the rug on which I lay; but my first thought was not for my own safety.

“Mom—! Dad—!”

Razor blades tore at my lungs, and I couldn’t utter another sound. A dark blanket of nothingness began to creep over me once again. The thick smoke in the room clouded my vision.

A thundering crash from the other side of the room jarred me back to awareness. Splinters showered across the floor as the head of a red-bladed axe bit through the door. One more blow sundered the door and a bulky form pushed its way inside.

The intruder rushed at me, arms out. Strong fingers reached for my throat.



Throwing my arm up for protection I let out a panicked cry.

“Darcy!” The man’s voice was muffled through a plastic mask and ventilator, but I recognized it as Hank Hrzinski’s, the fire chief. “You hurt?” he shouted. “You burned?”

Without waiting for a response, he hoisted me off the floor and onto his shoulders. Doing his best to shield me from falling embers and burning debris, he picked his way back out of the apartment. I faded in and out of consciousness. The smoke burned my lungs, and the jarring motion as the fire chief jostled me about almost made me retch.

Outside, cold air slapped at me. I sucked it in and immediately started to hack up phlegm and ash. Chief Hrzinski shifted me off his back and onto the front lawn as a paramedic rushed at me with an oxygen tank and mask.

Dimly, I was aware of shouting voices and darting silhouettes as a team of firefighters fought the blaze. Spray from half a dozen hoses disappeared into the fire consuming the house.

The roof cracked, and with a roar, fell in on itself.

I struggled to my feet. “Mom!” I screamed. “Dad!”

Someone grabbed my shoulders and pushed me back down.

“Mom!”

\* \* \*

“I’m not your mama.”

I sprang out of bed, disoriented. My sheets were a tangled mess around my feet, and my shirt was soaked with sweat.

The remnants of my nightmare faded as I blinked and looked around. The familiar walls of my cell were as gray and unwelcoming as they had been since the first day I arrived at the Arizona Center for Women ten years ago.

Looming over me was the dour face of Jerry Niles, one of the meanest prison guards in our cell block. For years I’d had to endure his crude jokes and clumsy innuendoes.

“But who knows, I *could* be your daddy,” he added with a twisted leer that made my stomach churn. The memory of my dead parents rushed back and I had to fight to keep my eyes from tearing over.

I pulled the bed sheets up to cover my legs.

“What do you want?” I said. “You’re not supposed to be in here before wakeup.” A quick glance at the window confirmed that dawn had not yet broken.

“Warden said to bring you down to processing early. He wants you out of here before morning chow. Says it’s better for everyone else who’s left behind. Don’t

want to remind them there's a whole other world on the outside."

"All right, fine." I tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "Just give me a minute to get ready."

"I'll help you get dressed," he offered with a sickening smile.

I shuddered at the thought, and felt a wave of anger run through me.

*Keep control!*

"My eyes can see," I said under my breath.

He peered closer at me. "What's that?"

"Nothing."

"Don't give me that bullshit. Are you backtalking me?"

I gave a quick shake of my head. "No, sir."

My response was automatic. Obedience was something they drilled into you early. They told you when to sleep and when to wake up, when to shower and when to eat, and after a while, you surrender to it.

But I was getting out on parole today. I'd have to learn to make decisions for myself, and not jump every time someone barked an order.

I gathered some courage, raised my eyebrows and waved him out of the cell. "Well, are you going to give me some privacy?"

Like the strike of a rattlesnake, Jerry thrust his face in front of mine.

"Don't push me, Darcy. You're not out yet, and lots can happen between now and then."

I clenched my fists, bunching them under the blanket.

*My tongue can taste.*

Closing my eyes, I sat rigid as a statue, as if ignoring him would make him magically disappear. I continued whispering to myself.

"My mouth can smile."

"Gibberish," said Jerry. "Crazy in the head."

In the bunk above me, my cellmate shifted in her sleep and muttered something.

Glancing up at the noise, Jerry straightened and took a step back. Curling his lips in a grimace of distaste, he barked, "Get dressed. Like I said, Warden wants you out of here today, you little firebug. We all do."

I opened my eyes when he left the cell. He left the door open, but he remained outside on guard, just out of sight.

"I am in control," I told myself as I released the bed sheets from a strangle hold.

Blackened streaks marked the cloth where my fingers had grabbed the material.

## Chapter Two

**I stood at** the bus stop outside the front gates of the prison and hugged my arms around my chest.

It almost never rained in southern Arizona, and when it did, it didn't last very long. Of course, today of all days, the rain came down hard. I had tied my hair back in a ponytail, and whenever I moved my head, the wet strands ran along the bare skin of my neck and sent chills down my spine. My breath puffed out like misty clouds of smoke in the crisp morning air.

I silently prayed for sun as I searched the road with haunted eyes.

A car raced past and hit a puddle. I skipped back, but a torrent of water splashed all over my jeans and sneakers.

"Damn it!" I yelled. I showed the driver my middle finger, and he showed me his before his car turned a corner.

"Jerk!"

Trying to keep warm, I pulled the collar of my jacket tighter around my neck. Looking up at the dark clouds, I silently cursed. At the same time, I couldn't help but wonder if there was a link between the bad weather and my release from prison. Or maybe I was just crazy and imagining the world was out to punish me.

Just as I spotted a ray of sunshine poking out between the clouds, the screeching brakes of a Greyhound startled me and I let out a yelp. After I put my heart back in my chest, I reached down and grabbed my duffel bag.

A middle-aged driver stepped off the bus as he covered his balding head with a cap.

"You getting on?" he asked, giving me an expectant glance. I nodded and passed him my bag. He opened a side panel and, with a grunt, tossed my bag in.

I took a step toward the door, but the driver cleared his throat.

"Ticket?" he asked.

"Huh? Yeah."

I fumbled through my pockets in search of the voucher while trying to ignore his impatient look. After a moment, I pulled the ticket out and handed it to him. He waved me on, and I climbed the short flight of steps into the bus ... and



froze.

For the first time in ten years, I found myself facing a group of total strangers. My heart skipped a beat, my lungs seized and nausea washed over me.

I felt everyone's eyes on me, angry and accusing. Did they know about me? About my past? About my affliction?

"Miss!" It was the driver. He made a shooining motion with his hand and grunted.

I tried to breathe, but anxiety gripped me.

"We're on a timetable," he said in a harried voice.

In a way, that helped calm me. It reminded me that even in the big chaotic outside world, everywhere you went and everything you did was by some sort of routine, and I found that very comforting. Inside, every minute of every day is regulated, and you can surrender yourself to it.

Slowly I regained my composure and steeled myself to join the strangers on the bus.

From what I could see, the only two seats still unoccupied were in the last row on either side of the aisle; only one was by a window.

The bus driver closed the door and eased himself into his chair. He touched the accelerator and the bus lurched forward. I grabbed the overhead bar before I fell on my face and, cursing the driver under my breath, picked my way down the aisle.

Two elderly women stared at me with pinched faces. I forced my eyes ahead, but I couldn't avert my ears. The blue-haired old biddy sitting next to the window tried to keep her voice low, but I heard her anyway.

"I don't know why they let them on the bus. There should be a rule."

As I passed by, I set my jaw and pretended not to hear. I told myself not to let it get to me, but then her silver-haired companion clutched her purse tighter in her fat arms.

I barked, "You don't have to worry about your purse, lady. I wasn't in for robbery; I was in for manslaughter!"

They both gasped in astonishment, but I could take no pleasure in their reaction. I'd let myself slip, and that was something I had vowed not to do.

I walked past them, and ignored the sudden interest of the passengers who'd overheard me. All the while, I told myself to calm down. There was bound to be more confrontation in the days ahead, and if I couldn't overlook two old gossips, how was I going to manage to control the rest of my life?

I had a sudden urge to turn around and run back into the comforting arms of the prison. Instead, I reached the seat by the window, sat down, and stared out as the bus pulled off into the strange and frightening world of my new found

freedom.

I didn't let anyone see the tears misting in my eyes. I didn't let anyone know that, inside, I was just a frightened little girl who wanted nothing more than to have someone take me in their arms and say, "Everything's going to be all right." What I wanted and what I would get were two different things.

I'd met a lot of cruel and petty people in my life, and if you showed them even a tiny crack in your armor, they would see your weakness and attack. Hatred, misunderstanding, fear, and intolerance ran rampant in strangers, and if you let it get to you, it would tear you apart.

The passengers on the bus radiated everything from indifference at one end to complete animosity at the other. But I had to be strong. I had to act tough. I had to be as hard as stone.

Like a child afraid of the dark, I told myself over and over again to be brave.

There was much worse ahead of me:

I was going home.

## Chapter Three

**As the bus** hurtled down the highway, passing small towns, farms, ranches, decrepit barns and run-down gas stations, my anxiety slowly slipped away.

I absorbed every sight. I drank in the colors and contrasts. I gawked at passengers in cars and minivans. I let my imagination run riot with the notion that all possibilities lay ahead of me. The future was wide open, like the road ahead of us, and I felt giddy with the thoughts of how wonderful my life was going to be.

No doubt my fellow passengers wondered if I had come from a different kind of institution, the way I grinned like an idiot when I saw a herd of horses with their spring foals playing a game of tag in a grassy field.

I didn't care. Let them think what they wanted; I was free and although I dreaded going home, I was looking forward to starting over and rebuilding my life. Fate had given me a second chance to do things right, and this time I was determined to do just that.

The tiniest wave of uncertainty ran through me as we passed a road sign: *Welcome to Middleton, AZ. (pop. 2628)*

Starting over was good and all, and my social reintegration counselor at the prison had encouraged me to repair my relationships with my family, rather than relocate to a new town and start over.

"Running away is merely avoiding the problems in your life," he told me. "The only way to resolve the issues in your past is to address them in the present."

That wave of uncertainty turned into a deep-seated feeling of unease. I had some pretty big issues to resolve. For one thing, my uncle, Edward, hadn't spoken more than two words in a row to me in the past ten years.

The bus driver slowed the bus as we approached the dusty parking lot of the Lazy Z Motel—a one-level, sprawling old building set at an angle to the highway.

The bus wheeled into the lot and unexpectedly lurched to a stop at the last moment, throwing me into the back of the seat in front of me. Someone's knapsack fell off the overhead rack, giving one passenger an unpleasant start;

and a half-full can of soda toppled, spilling liquid over a young woman's sneakers.

After muscling the door release open, the driver, ignoring the grumbling from his passengers, grabbed a clipboard and pen and logged his progress.

"Middleton," he announced in a disinterested voice as he un-wedged himself from his seat and ambled down the steps.

I was the only one to stand up. Everyone else, it seemed, was moving on to Flagstaff or beyond.

Ignoring the glares from the two old biddies, I made my way up the aisle. As I neared the exit, I took a deep breath. For a short time, the bus had been a safe haven. Now, like a newborn chick leaving the nest for the first time, I had to muster all the bravery I could and make that leap into the wide world to test my wings.

At the top of the stairs, I faltered. There was no safety net, no one to catch me if I fell. If I took one more step, I would be completely on my own.

Behind me, the blue-haired old woman rolled her eyes and let out an impatient cough.

Outside, the driver unceremoniously dropped my duffel bag on the gravel, sending up a small plume of dust.

"Your stop?"

I nodded and took my first real step into freedom; but one single step was all I could bring myself to take.

Drawing in a deep breath, I centered myself. I had to gather my courage and face the present.

"Can you speed it up, lady?" said the driver.

I flashed a weak smile and took another step away from the bus, giving him enough room to maneuver his bulk back inside. The door closed with the sound of permanence. There was no going back.

Long after the bus pulled away, I remained standing at the shoulder of the road, my bag at my feet and my heart in my throat.

\* \* \*

The Lazy Z Motel was exactly as I remembered it, and its familiarity was just enough to get me moving. I hefted my duffel bag and walked into the front office.

Bracing myself for the worst, I was thrown off by the unexpected: there was no one there.

The office, however, was a total disaster. Papers were scattered all over the

counter, binders were piled on top of directories and magazines. An old style rotary telephone was smudged with the dirt of a thousand oily fingers, and a musty guestbook was open at a page that had more coffee stains than signatures. Beside an old computer monitor a rack of outdated maps awaited a purchase that would never happen. A buzzing fly circled a bowl of unwrapped candies as if wary of a possible trap.

The office itself was small and cramped, and half of it was dedicated as a customers' lounge. Two long benches were pressed up against either wall, the orange cushions tattered and dusty. A folding table served as a coffee station—the only area that looked tended to and clean. An ancient picture of an abandoned barn hung over the coffee machine.

I approached the desk, dropped my bag on the floor, and rang the silver bell.

A deep voice preceded the man who stepped out of the back room: “Be with you in a—”

Uncle Edward was taller than he appeared. Like many people who towered over others, his shoulders had developed a slouch in an attempt to seem less imposing. Weathered skin hung loose from his lean face. He was in his late fifties but could easily have passed for someone a decade older. His short-cropped hair, once a dark brown, had turned gray and had receded in a widow's peak.

Not the most personable man in Middleton, Uncle Edward nevertheless had been in business for years and had learned to put on an air of quiet professionalism when it came to his customers, whether they were one-time patrons passing through on their way to destinations unknown, or if it was someone like Wild Will Tyler, kicked out of his house every other weekend by his shrill wife for having one too many drinks down at The Trough after a seven-day stint at the dog food factory.

That professional demeanor evaporated the moment he saw me, and the smile melted from his lips.

I held my breath and waited for him to speak.

“Darcy.” His voice was monotone, tinged with a hint of disappointment and annoyance. “When did you get out?”

“Nice to see you, too, Uncle Edward.”

Elastic silence stretched between us until it reached the breaking point.

“Wasn't expecting you,” he growled. His words felt like a punch in the stomach.

I suddenly wanted to run from the room and never look back. It was a horrible mistake to think I could ever come home again. My counselor was wrong: it was much easier to run away and start all over again in a place where no one knew

my past, the terrible things I'd done, or the misery I'd caused.

"I tried to call, but all I got was the machine. I left a message." With every ounce of courage I could muster, I made my voice affable.

Uncle Edward didn't budge. "Don't remember any message."

"I said I was getting out today."

"Yeah...?"

I tried to swallow, but my mouth was too dry.

"I was ... hoping you could put me up for a while. Just until I can sort some things out."

Uncle Edward leveled his eyes at me, drew his lips tighter. "How long?"

The lump in my throat prevented me from breathing.

Just then, a hurricane in blue sweatpants and a yellow flower-print shirt burst through the door.

Where Uncle Edward was tall and lean, Aunt Martha was short and heavyset — 'happy fat' was how she described herself.

Aunt Martha ripped off her yellow rubber gloves and, with a broad smile, threw her arms around me, nearly bowling both of us over in her enthusiasm.

"Darcy! You should have told me you were coming today. I thought you said they might not let you out until next week."

Casting a disapproving glance at my uncle, who pursed his lips, I said, "Thought I'd surprise you."

"Oh my Lord, you did! I just about peed myself when I saw you. We missed you so much around here. It's been too quiet. I'm so glad to see you. So you're here to stay?"

Uncle Edward's frown deepened. I pretended not to notice.

"If it's not too much trouble. I wouldn't want to inconvenience anyone."

Aunt Martha clucked her tongue. "Pish-posh." She flicked her hand at her husband. "Edward. Quit being a bump. Grab her bags." She beamed at me. "We'll put you in room fourteen on the end."

"Thank you, Aunt Martha."

"Not at all. Go get yourself cleaned up. I have a million questions, but we can catch up over lunch. I have to get out of these smelly work clothes. I'm not dressed for company."

But she wasn't going to let me go that easily. Grinning from ear to ear, she held my hands out and gave me a good once-over. With a cluck of mock-disapproval, she pinched the skin on my slender waist and winked at me.

"Yep, nothing a good home-cooked meal can't cure."

I smiled so hard I thought I would cry.

Giving me a nod, Aunt Martha left with as much excitement and energy as

when she entered.

She called back over her shoulder. "Give me half an hour and I'll have a feast fit for a queen ready for you."

"Oh, Aunt Martha, don't trouble yourself," I said.

My words fell on deaf ears; she was already gone, a whirlwind of a woman.

Uncle Edward grumbled as he stepped out from behind the counter and lifted my duffel bag.

"Well, come on, then." Clearly, he was not pleased with the turn of events.

He didn't say a word as he led me out of the office and down the long walkway. When we arrived at my room, he dropped my bag on the ground and pressed the key into my palm, never once looking me in the eye.

Without fanfare, or so much as curse, he spun on his heel and strode back to the office.

I stared at his back and chewed my lip. Aunt Martha and Uncle Edward were polar opposites in almost every way, and they always would be.

Kyra, one of my cellmates, often said, "You can never go home again." I'd also heard her say, "There's no place like home." I guess she was right on both accounts.

For the first time in ten years, and despite the obvious friction from Uncle Edward, I felt there might be a glimmer of hope that I could find some acceptance here; perhaps, if I was very lucky, I might even find some measure of forgiveness, if not from others, then maybe from myself.

I unlocked the door to my motel room, my new home, and stepped inside.



## Chapter Four

**Separated by an** alley barely wide enough to squeeze through, the small one-bedroom bungalow directly behind the Lazy Z served as the Johnsons' permanent home.

Back in the day, the small dwelling was occupied by a foreman when the motel was little more than a large barracks for seasonal farm workers. Over the years, it had been converted to a cozy bungalow.

Tiny and cramped by most standards, my aunt and uncle had lived there since they inherited the motel from Uncle Edward's parents over two decades before. Uncle Edward and Aunt Martha were never able to have children, so the two of them had no need of anything larger.

The inside was cluttered with old rickety furniture Aunt Martha swore was antique. Assorted knick-knacks decorated every available flat surface, and piles of books and magazines were stacked in every corner. At one point early in her life, Aunt Martha had fancied herself a painter and produced dozens of ghastly landscapes, still lifes, and other questionable works of art no one in their right mind would ever buy; she had them all framed and hung throughout the house, blind to anyone else's opinion or taste.

The kitchen, obviously the central hub of activity in the house, had a large table overflowing with a buffet: corn on the cob, potato salad, pickles, bread and a large ham with all the fixings.

I popped a dill pickle in my mouth while I filled my plate with one of everything.

Uncle Edward glowered, and I felt a flush of embarrassment.

I gently bit down on the pickle. The crunch was horrendously loud. Silently cursing, I finished chewing and sat down on the chair. All eyes watched me until I finally swallowed and offered a guilty smile.

"Sorry."

I folded my hands together as Aunt Martha recited the blessing.

"Bless us, O Lord, for these thy gifts which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ Our Lord, amen; and thank you for returning our niece to us after so many years. Amen."

I replied “Amen” with Uncle Edward, and hesitated only a moment before scooping up a forkful of potato salad, the mayonnaise smearing the corner of my lips. In between mouthfuls, I flashed a grateful smile to my aunt.

“Can’t tell you how great this is, Aunt Martha. Haven’t had real food in years.”

I barely finished chewing what was in my mouth before pushing in a still steaming hot bread roll. I grunted with pleasure as the sweet bread melted on my tongue.

“Make sure you get some of that homemade apple sauce.” Aunt Martha was in her element. I could have kissed her for the feast she’d created for me.

Not everyone was in a celebratory mood. Uncle Edward hadn’t touched his plate.

“Was it a prison, or a stable?” He sounded like he’d just swallowed a cup of vinegar.

“Edward!” Aunt Martha said.

Trying to ignore the heat rising in my cheeks, I quickly finished chewing and swallowed. “Sorry. I guess I’m going to have to get used to civilization again.”

“Pish-posh. You just help yourself, dear.” Aunt Martha glared at her husband. “We’re just glad you’re here. Aren’t we, Edward?”

Uncle Edward slapped his fork on the table. “You’re glad she’s here? What an act! When’s the last time you went down there for a visit?”

Aunt Martha blanched. “I may not have gone there, but I phoned every week and I sent a care package every single month.”

She then stared down at her lap and rubbed her hands together nervously. When she looked up at me, her eyes were misted over.

“I hope you aren’t too upset,” she said to me. “I couldn’t abide that place; seeing you in there. I would have visited more, but with all the work here...” She shot daggers at Uncle Edward. “She’s your sister’s child, and you treat her like a disease.”

I put my hand on her arm. “I don’t care that you didn’t visit, Aunt Martha. Besides, I didn’t want anyone to see me there anyway. Your packages were more than enough for me.”

Aunt Martha turned back to me and wiped a tear from her eye. She forced a smile and shook her head.

“But that’s all yesterday.” She reached out and took my hand. “Today we have our niece back. She’s family, and she’s here to stay.” She gave a single nod as if that would seal the deal.

“No!” Uncle Edward pushed his chair back so hard, it tipped over and crashed against the tile floor with a resounding crack. He stood straight as a rod, face

flushed with anger.

Aunt Martha said, "Edward!"

He stopped her before she could protest further. "I sat there in the courtroom day after day. I heard every word of testimony."

"Edward, no!" Aunt Martha barked.

He slapped his hand down on the table like a judge pounding his gavel against the sound block to restore order to the court, then pointed a finger at me.

"You never gave them a good explanation. You never told anyone what really happened. That's why they sent you away. No, they couldn't prove murder, but they could prove manslaughter."

I launched myself to my feet. Rage washed over me like hot lava. I felt trapped.

"It was an accident," I said. "It was an accident!"

I balled my hands into fists by my sides.

Uncle Edward scoffed. "Yeah, yeah, so you keep saying. But those jurors didn't have a doubt in their minds, and you know what? I don't either."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My last living blood relation hated me and thought I had murdered my own mother and father. My fingernails dug into the palms of my hands. I wanted to scream at Uncle Edward, but I bit down hard on my tongue instead.

Uncle Edward took a step toward me, and I tensed.

A faint wisp of smoke curled out from between my clenched fingers. I could feel the heat swelling inside like the first spark of a dark, deadly furnace.

"Edward!" Aunt Martha half gasped, half screamed.

"It's true. Tell me I'm wrong," Uncle Edward demanded. "Oh, you may not have meant to kill them, but you certainly meant to kill someone. Tell me I'm wrong!"

I tried not to pay attention to him, tried to block out all external sensation. I closed my eyes in concentration.

*My eyes can see.*

*My tongue can taste.*

*My mouth can smile.*

Uncle Edward's eyes narrowed like a hawk spotting a field mouse.

"You're the one who started the fire."

His fingers curled like talons.

*My lungs can breathe.*

*My heart can beat.*

I willed myself to sit back down. I clenched my fists as the wisps of smoke grew fainter.

“You burned your own parents alive.”

*My stomach can digest.*

Aunt Martha finally found her voice. “Edward! That is truly enough!”

*My legs can walk.*

“Yes,” he said, taking a single step back, “it is.” And with that he stalked out of the room.

*My body is calm.*

Aunt Martha got out of her chair and came over to me. With tears in her eyes, she wrapped her arms around my shoulders.

“It’s all right, honey. I’m going to take care of you now. You’ll see. We’re family, you know. Good or bad. Right or wrong. We’re all we’ve got.”

Pain lanced down my fingers, and I forced my hands to open. Flecks of black ash fell from my palms.

If Aunt Martha heard my next words, she gave no indication; she simply held me tight as I completed my mantra:

*I am in control.*

## Chapter Five

**My house burned** out of control.

Like a panicked hive of ants, firefighters rushed to and from the building, trying to contain the damage. Half a dozen hoses fired heavy streams of water at the blaze, but they were no match for the inferno. It was a lost cause. Their efforts were in vain.

My face was streaked with soot and tears, and I barely comprehended what was going on. My parents were still trapped inside the house.

And I knew, as certainly as I knew my name, it was all my fault.

*“Mom! Dad!”*

\* \* \*

...My cries echoed in my thoughts long after I woke from the nightmare.

I stood in front of the bathroom mirror in my panties and a white T-shirt. Steam from the shower fogged the mirror and blurred my reflection. Absently, I wiped my hand across its surface to wipe away the condensation. Haunted eyes stared back at me as a tear slowly wound its way down my cheek.

I hated myself.

*That close!* I had come *that* close to losing control again yesterday. Why couldn't I control myself? I had done so well the last few years; now I was slipping.

I stared at the palms of my hands. Not a mark on them. They appeared innocent and harmless, but they were filled with fiery hatred and destruction.

I drew my hand across my cheek, wiping away the tears.

Then I slapped the mirror. “What’s wrong with you?”

What was this affliction inside of me? Why did I have it? How could I get rid of it? If not for the mantra—my salvation—I would have absolutely no control over when and where it would strike.

I thrust a hand behind the shower curtain to test the temperature of the water, and then reached down to pull my T-shirt off when I heard a loud knock at the door. I turned the shower off and grabbed a bathrobe.

“Just a minute!” I called out as I wrapped the belt around my waist and tied it

in a quick knot. I opened the door and smiled.

“Oh, hello, Aunt Martha.”

My aunt did not look me in the eye. I could tell she was more than a little embarrassed.

I stepped out onto the wooden boardwalk and waited patiently until she screwed up enough courage to tell me what was on her mind.

“I, uh, want to apologize for your uncle,” Aunt Martha began. “He’s a cranky ass, you know. Doesn’t know when to keep his mouth shut.”

“I’ve heard worse.” With a little effort, I kept my voice nonchalant.

“Maybe, but not from family. He shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

Uncle Edward and I had never been close. Even as a child, he would treat me with cold indifference when I came over to visit—a sharp contrast to Aunt Martha’s welcoming arms and lovingly baked treats. I didn’t know if he didn’t like kids, or just me.

I guessed the past decade’s events had turned his apathy toward me into hatred.

Maybe there was more to it than that, judging by Aunt Martha’s words.

“Taken what out on me?” I asked.

“Well...”

I put a hand on her shoulder. She was trembling. “What is it, Aunt Martha?”

Wringing her hands, she mumbled, “I don’t mean to put this on you, because it’s not your fault. How could you know? You just got here.”

I spoke in a soft voice. “Tell me.”

A furtive glance in the direction of the office seemed to ease her nervousness. There was no one listening in to her confession.

“Well, for a couple years after ... your ordeal ... business got real slow. Some folks stayed away because they didn’t understand; some were angry; some just didn’t know what to say. On top of that, the economy hasn’t been what it used to be. Fewer travelers. With that new interweb thing people just talk on their computers rather than meet face to face. What is this world coming to? I mean —”

“And?” I prompted to get her back on track.

“We had to get an extension on the loan, and then we had to lay off all our staff just to make ends meet.”

I put my hand on my heart. “I was wondering why it was just you two here. Why didn’t you say anything? I’m so sorry.”

“No, don’t,” she said. “It’s been a rough ride, but it’s not your fault. It’s nobody’s fault, really. Oh, this isn’t your problem. I should have just kept my big trap shut. It’s just—”

“Just what?”

Aunt Martha sighed. “Well, Edward and I aren’t getting younger.”

“You’re not so—”

She put up a hand to stop me.

“We are. But that’s not what I wanted to say. Things have started to pick up again. We’re finally shifting back to normal. Who knows, we might even have a little left over this year.”

“That’s great, Aunt Martha.” I furrowed my brow, wondering how long it would take her to make her way completely around the bush before she finally came to the point.

“Well, working long hours seven days a week is taking its toll. And ... well ... we’re getting tired. Running a motel is a lot of work for two old fogies like us.”

She needed to take another deep breath before she looked me in the eye.

“We’ve been talking about selling,” she said finally.

“Oh?” I wasn’t sure how I felt about that, wasn’t sure I had the right to feel one way or another about it. For as long as I could remember, the Lazy Z had been like a mainstay for our family. Although only related by marriage, my mother and Aunt Martha were closer than most sisters were, and when I was young they wouldn’t go more than a day without visiting, so I was always over here. I think I spent more time playing in the parking lot and the field behind the motel than I did in my own backyard.

“But the market is still soft right now. We’d lose our shirts. We just can’t sell this year; maybe not even next year. In the meantime, let’s just say we probably wouldn’t want to hire the sort of person who would take the salary we could afford to pay. Rock and a hard place. The Lazy Z has been in the family for fifty years. Edward is taking it as a personal failure that we’re faced with this.”

“Is there anything I can do? Anything?”

Aunt Martha wrung her hands again, as if expecting the worst. “Yes, there is.”

I nodded once, firmly. “Name it.”

“Stay on. Work the motel. Like I said, we can’t pay you much. Oh, Lord, I feel like I’m taking advantage of you for this.”

I had so many conflicting thoughts at that point; I didn’t know what to say first.

“That’s what I wanted in the first place: To stay here and help out. But Uncle Edward said—”

Aunt Martha waved her hand. “Edward is as stubborn as an ass. He needs to get over himself. Life’s too short. He knows deep in his heart it was an accident, what happened to his sister and Robert. He’s just being ornery. Can you forgive him?”



“Forgive him? Of course, Aunt Martha. And I would love to stay and help out.”

She threw her arms around me and gave me a noisy kiss on the cheek. “You won’t regret this, Darcy.”

For the first time that day, I felt my heart swell with hope. Leave it to Aunt Martha to make the person responsible for the deaths of her in-laws welcome in her home.

“I’m just glad I can help.”

“Edward’s in the office,” she said. “I told him to apologize to you, though if you get a grunt out of him you’re doing better than I am.”

I shook my head. “I really don’t need an apology, but I’ll go see him right away.”

“Listen,” she said. “I want you to feel at home here. I know the room isn’t much, but it’s yours for as long as you like.”

“That’s far too generous. You have to let me pay my own way.”

She waved her hand. “Pish-posh. I’m just so happy you’re back.”

Aunt Martha beamed a wide smile at me and I suddenly felt much better about myself. She hugged me again, and I didn’t want her to ever let go.

“Me too, Aunt Martha. Me too.”

## Chapter Six

**Uncle Edward and** my mother could have passed as twins, though nearly five years separated them. Both were tall and spare, almost willowy. They had narrow jaws, high cheekbones and slightly protruding chins. Both were fair complexioned, but that's where the similarity ended.

Eleanor Johnson—Ellie to her friends and family—was a free spirit. She refused to cut her hair, and by the time she was an adult, her flaxen locks hung down to her hips. She would occasionally wear it in a braid, but her preferred style was to leave it loose. Uncle Edward had never changed his hairstyle from the day he left the military; as far back as I could remember, he had always sported a crew cut which he would get trimmed at least once every two weeks.

Eleanor explored art and literature; she loved crafts and antiques. At any given point in her life, she had at least one adopted pet—a stray cat, a wounded bird, a lost dog; and once she even brought home a lost bear cub (which apparently caused quite a stir in the Johnson household that day).

Uncle Edward went straight into business courses in Flagstaff and, once he returned to Middleton, gradually ensconced himself in the day to day operations of the Lazy Z, assuming as much responsibility as his father would dole out until the day my grandfather had his second heart attack and decided it was time to retire.

My mother never wanted anything to do with running a business, and was more than happy to let her brother take over the Lazy Z. When Uncle Edward and Ellie were old enough, Uncle Edward got the motel and my mother got the large family house for their inheritance. My grandparents relocated to a cabin on the edge of some property they owned outside town, where they lived out their remaining days.

My mother loved to tell me about how my father had changed her life. When it came to marriage, she would never have tied the knot—she was such a wild spirit—if she hadn't met her soul mate in my father the summer after high school graduation.

She was waitressing in Fresno while staying at her great aunt's when she met Robert Anderson on a hike with her cousins. A biologist, he was monitoring

migratory patterns of the native bird population for the University of Sacramento, and the two of them hit it off famously. By the end of that summer, Ellie had come back home to Middleton freshly engaged. Robert transferred to Northern Arizona University, and I arrived a little under a year later.

My mother told me once she never thought her brother would ever get married, not because Uncle Edward didn't want to, but more because of his naturally abrasive personality. None of the local girls wanted anything to do with him, except for one. It took someone like Aunt Martha to see past the gruff exterior and spot the loyal, hardworking, and devoted person beneath. Rumor had it that she had proposed to *him*—something of a scandal back in those days.

Unfortunately, marriage never softened Uncle Edward, and even his own family had difficulty spending more than a few hours at a time with him.

Growing up, I can't say I had ever held more than a one-sentence conversation with him; but now, standing outside the front office of the Lazy Z in the morning sun, my hair still wet against my back from my morning shower, he had my undivided attention.

I walked a step behind Uncle Edward, who frequently pointed his finger like a gun while taking me through the orientation—as if I had never spent thousands of days at the motel.

His voice dripped with impatience. “Right there's the electrical room, in case you need to throw a breaker back on. Dumb-ass power company out here. Everything goes dead in a storm, and we get interruptions even on a clear day.”

Reaching out, he rattled the door knob, and glanced at me pointedly.

“Always make sure it's locked. Check it twenty times a day if you have to. Every time you walk by, check it. Don't want some punk kid sneaking in there to smoke dope.”

“Got it.” I nodded affirmatively.

Uncle Edward shuffled down to the next room. He paused and made a show of producing a key from a retractable karabiner hooked to his belt loop. Jiggling the knob to prove to me it was locked, he proceeded to unlock it and threw open the door.

“Maintenance and laundry room. All the cleaning carts and room supplies are in here. Light bulbs, toilet paper, what have you. Same thing: check the door every time you go past. Guests might think it's a free-for-all on towels and soap, and those damned things cost a fortune.”

I nodded again. “Got it.”

Uncle Edward gave me a stern look. I kept my face serious.

He grunted before he continued on down the line of rooms to the end of the motel, not looking back, simply assuming I was following.

Behind the building a length of pavement bordered a field of tall grass that stretched all the way to a gentle hill a hundred feet away. As a child, I used to love racing down there on my bike. Beyond the hill was Circle Lake, where we sometimes picnicked and fished.

My uncle pointed toward the end of the motel. He said, "Back there is the trash bin. Keep it locked as well. Ranch folk will drive up here in the middle of the night and fill it up with their junk otherwise. We don't need to be paying to haul someone else's garbage."

"Uncle Edward, I want to thank you for giving me a chance. I know we've never seen eye to eye, and I know we've only gotten more distant over the past ten years, but I think..."

I trailed off under his harsh glare.

"I don't give a hoot what you think, little girl," he said. "I don't need any help, no matter what Martha thinks. I only agreed to letting you stay and work the place out of respect for my sister's memory. But I have just one condition for you, so let's get this straight right here and right now. This is my motel and I'm the boss. You do what I say, when I say, and you don't give me any sass. Otherwise, keep out of my way and I'll keep out of yours. It pleases Martha that you're here, and as they say, 'happy wife, happy life.' So as long as you work hard and be nice to your aunt, then everything will be right as rain. Clear?"

"Crystal," I replied.

Uncle Edward watched my eyes a moment, as if that would tell him if I was mocking him. I wasn't.

He said, "Now shut up and let me finish giving you the grand tour."

I nodded. "You got it."

Uncle Edward gave me the rundown on every aspect of the motel business over the next few hours, and I hung on his every word.

As the day progressed, I had the impression that he was somehow warming to me. At the same time, I experienced something I hadn't felt in a decade.

Despite his gruff exterior and harsh comments, I found myself admiring Uncle Edward. He had a strange kind of confidence in himself, and he came at the world in a no-nonsense manner that was very refreshing. No matter how abrasive and standoffish Uncle Edward was, he nevertheless had taken that step into accepting me as a part of his life.

Uncle Edward had a lot of issues that I'm certain would never be resolved. As much as he and his sister differed, I knew they loved each other from how my mother had spoken of him, telling me stories of their youth, how they got into trouble together, and how Uncle Edward would rise to her defense whenever he felt Ellie's honor was threatened.

I knew I could never replace my mother in his heart, but from piecing together all the anecdotes and opinions I had ever heard about Uncle Edward, I was fairly sure there was another way. Uncle Edward valued hard work, loyalty, punctuality, practicality and honor.

If I could earn his respect by mirroring his values and by working the motel without complaint, I would gladly suffer his hostility toward me.

I was already miles ahead with Aunt Martha, who didn't have a mean bone in her ample body; but I swore to myself that I wouldn't take her or her generosity for granted. I had a lot of work in front of me, but I was all right with that. It was all worth it if I could finally turn my life around and get back on track.

So, with that in mind, over the next couple of days, I immersed myself in the business. I worked the front counter, I helped Aunt Martha clean the rooms, and I even went so far as to organize Uncle Edward's paperwork. He protested that everything was already where he could find it, and didn't need rearranging; but even still, he didn't stop me.

After ten years away, I was finally home.

## Chapter Seven

**It was late** evening nearing the end of my third work shift since returning home. I stared at a disordered mess of invoices scattered over the counter, some recent, some from previous years. How Uncle Edward ever managed to get by without a tax audit was beyond me. His accountant had to be a miracle worker.

With an exasperated sigh, I began the slow and methodical task of sorting the invoices by company and date. Although I heard the evening bus pull up, I was so absorbed in my duties, I barely registered it. The front door chimed.

At first I couldn't focus when I glanced up, my eyes were so tight from the filing job. When I finally realized there was another person in the office, and settled my eyes on him, my breath caught in my throat.

Wearing a pair of dark jeans and a tight-fitting T-shirt that showed off his broad shoulders, a very attractive man stood in front me, a wide smile on his face. Tanned and athletic, he could have easily been a model.

"Uh, hello?" he said when I hadn't yet spoken. I self-consciously brushed my hair back with my hands and mustered a smile.

"Good evening. Welcome to the Lazy Z. May I help you?"

"Yes, please," he said with a warm smile. "Can you tell me what your room rates are?"

"One ten a night in advance. Plus plus."

He cocked his head. "Plus plus?"

"Plus tax. You know, hotel tax, sales tax."

"Ah." He seemed to be considering his decision.

"You here just for the night? We have discounts for longer stays?" One could only hope—

He smiled. "Actually, I'm probably going to be in town for quite some time."

"Oh?"

"Name's Neil." He stuck his hand out.

I stared at it like an idiot for a moment, then caught myself and put mine out to shake his.

"Uh, Darcy. How long is 'a while'? A week ... or so?"

"Most likely permanently."

I cocked my head to one side. “How’s that?”

“I work for the Denver Fire Department, and don’t get me wrong, it’s been great, but not much room for advancement. Do you know Hank Hrzinski?”

“Chief Hrzinski? Yeah,” I said after a moment. Hank had been the one who’d dragged me from the fire. “He’s been here long as I can remember—since I was a kid.”

“Well,” Neil said. “He and my chief knew each other from way back. About a month ago Hank called him up and said he was thinking about retiring and asked if there was anyone who might want the position. Together they pulled some strings with the town council here and, long story short, I got offered the job when he steps down next year. I’m here to learn the ropes until then.”

“Well, congratulations.”

He smiled with a hint of shyness. “Thanks.”

I blurted, “So are you here on a house-hunting trip? —Oh, God, I’m sorry. It’s none of my business. I always hated how everyone in a small town knew your business, and here I am poking my big nose into yours.”

Neil laughed. “Don’t worry about it. After spending nearly all my life in Denver, I think I would rather give up a little privacy knowing that your neighbors are at least taking an interest.” He shrugged. “The chief offered me a room at his place until I got settled, but I just couldn’t impose. I made tentative arrangements at a boarding house run by someone named Kathy Thornhill, but the room won’t be available for a few days.”

I made a sour face, and Neil raised an eyebrow in question.

“Listen,” I said. “We have a monthly rate for a room with a kitchenette. Probably a better rate than you’d get boarding at Kathy Thornhill’s place, and a good deal more privacy.”

“Sounds great.” Neil smiled. “I’ll take the room.”

Trying to ignore the butterflies fluttering around in my stomach, I processed the check-in form and ran Neil’s credit card through for pre-authorization.

“Say, is there any place I can get something to eat?” he asked.

“Well, there’s the Finer Diner, but it closes at ten, except on weekends.” I glanced at the clock on the wall; it was a quarter to eleven. “Looks like you just missed it. You could try The Trough.”

“The Trough?”

“Country bar,” I explained. “It’s open till one every night and has a short order grill. At least you could get a plate of fries or wings or something. The owner—Jack Creel—is a bit of a grouch, but the food is good.”

Neil made a face. “That’s all right. I’m not really in the mood for Hank Williams, Jr.”



I laughed. "I'm sure they've updated their playlists in the last fifty years." I handed him the form. "I'll just get you to sign this."

While Neil signed, I grabbed the room key and plunked it down on the counter. "Room twelve on the right."

"Thanks. Mind if I grab some coffee?"

I flicked my eyes to the coffee station, which I hadn't yet tackled in my quest to organize the front office.

With a gesture in that direction, I said, "It's your funeral."

Neil laughed and slipped the room key into the front pocket of his jeans. He stepped over to the coffee counter and poured himself a Styrofoam cup of sludge. With a grimace, he stared at the coffee and said, "You weren't kidding \_\_\_"

The front door swung open and three men entered, their faces dark with menace. My stomach suddenly clenched.

Barry Burke was one of the largest men in Middleton, both in height and in width. Though well on his way to growing himself a good sized beer belly, there was no doubt underneath that layer of fat was a powerful man. It didn't look like he had shaved in a few days, and when he spoke, I could smell the alcohol on his breath.

"Well ain't this a kick in the crotch." He said it in a loud voice intended for an audience. Both Troy and Frank laughed in appreciation. I knew them only too well. Troy Hartman was a little weasel of a man. I had forgotten all about his lecherous smile and hyena-like laugh. Frank Simmons, eyes dark and menacing, had a mean streak in him that had always left me with a chill. He lifted a half-empty bottle of beer to his mouth and tipped it back.

From the coffee station, Neil glanced over.

Frank barked at him, "What're you looking at?"

With a quick glance at me, Neil said, "Nothing. Just getting some coffee."

In a mimicking sing-song, Troy said, "Just getting coffee." He shared a laugh with Frank. "Well? Get your damned coffee and get out."

Neil said to me, "Can I get you a cup?"

"No," I replied in a measured tone. "I'm fine."

With a half nod, Neil turned around and hunched over the coffee machine, searching for whitener.

Barry never even glanced at Neil; he simply continued to stare at me, a twisted smile on his lips.

Behind the counter, I clenched my fists at my sides and literally bit my tongue.

Barry growled low in his throat. "Never thought you'd have the guts to show

your face in town again.”

“What’s past is past, Barry. We all have to move on.”

*My eyes can see.*

*My tongue can taste.*

Barry cocked his head to the side, as if hearing my inner thoughts.

“Maybe I don’t want to move on,” he said.

*My mouth can smile.*

*My lungs can breathe.*

Barry leaned forward, his face ugly with anger. “What the hell are you whispering there?”

Out loud, I said, “Back off, Barry, or I’ll report you.”

Troy cackled. “Who’re you going to call, the sheriff? You hear that, Barry? She’s going to call your dad and tell on you.”

Barry’s smile deepened. “Is that so, Darcy? You going to tattle on me?”

“I’m warning you, Barry.”

“That’s funny: you warning me. You know, it’s time we finished this. I would say, about ten years past due.”

*My heart can beat.*

Tendrils of smoke curled around the fingers of my balled hands while Frank and Troy continued to grin from ear to ear, obviously enjoying the confrontation. Some people just get off on conflict.

“I don’t want any trouble, Barry,” I said, my voice tight.

He growled. “Well, you should’ve thought of that before you tried to kill me.”

Deep within me, I could feel the anger stirring. This was not the kind of personal information I wanted dredged up in front of anyone, least of all Neil, the new fire-chief-in-training. Never mind that I didn’t even know him, first impressions were lasting impressions, and the last thing I wanted was this kind of drama my first week home. I just wanted to put it all in the past and rebuild my life. Some people, however, just couldn’t let go of old wounds.

*My heart can beat.* Wait. I said that one already. *My stomach can digest...*

The mix of anger and embarrassment I felt threatened to make me lose control; and that was not something I could afford to do.

*My legs can—*

“But like the stupid idiot you are,” Barry continued, “you ended up killing your own parents!”

I felt the burning in my hands, but I couldn’t stop it.

I yelled, “I wish it was you in the cemetery, you sick bastard!”

Barry roared in anger. “Bitch!” He lunged at me, hands outstretched.

Reacting without thinking, I grabbed his wrists before his meaty paws could

find my throat.

My hands shook with the effort to hold him off, and also from another kind of exertion. A kind of energy swelled inside me. It wanted out.

At first, Barry was so outraged, he didn't feel anything, but as black smoke began to billow out from between my hands and his arms, Barry's rage quickly turned to surprise and then fear.

"What the hell?" he yelled.

I could smell his flesh burning.

Barry screamed, and jerked his arms back, but the power inside me had taken control and I could not let go of him.

*Control!*

I had to regain control! I had to finish the mantra properly.

*My heart can beat.*

I couldn't let it out.

*My stomach can digest.*

But Barry's shrieking ruined my concentration.

*My legs can walk!*

No! I had kept it contained for so long, I was not going to falter now.

*My body is calm!*

I forced myself to focus on my hands, release my fingers.

*I AM IN CONTROL!*

With excruciating effort, I let go of Barry's wrists, but it was too late. His sleeves were on fire.

"*Aaagh!*" he screamed. The look on his face was a cross between rage, shock and panic. Waving his arms around like a startled chicken trying to fly, he only made it worse. Frank threw what was left of his beer on Barry, and it was only then that Barry came to his senses and beat the flames out with his hands.

Staring at his smoldering sleeves, Barry yelled, "You little maniac! What did you do?"

The sneering smiles had disappeared from Troy's and Frank's faces. Frank scowled and smashed the bottom of his beer bottle against the counter, sending shards of glass spraying all over.

Frank pointed the shattered bottle at me. "I'm gonna make you cry, you bitch \_\_\_\_"

Just then, a torrent of steaming coffee splashed across his face. His shrieks of pain only got louder when he gingerly touched his scalded skin.

Standing in a defensive crouch, Neil brandished the empty coffee pot as a weapon.

"All of you," he said. "I think it's time to leave."

Troy, sporting a look of astonishment, was clearly torn with indecision. A coward at heart, he flicked his eyes back and forth between Neil and his injured friends.

Somehow, I found my voice.

“It’s over, Barry. It has been for a long time. You should never have come here.”

Barry glowered. “Oh, I’ll be back. Just you count on it, bitch.”

Nursing his blistered wrists, he backed out the door, Troy and Frank following in his wake.

Watching my three assailants stagger out of the parking lot and make their way down the street, I became aware that Neil was staring at me. As if realizing only then he still had the empty coffee container in his shaking hand, he placed it on the counter with exaggerated care.

My heart was pounding from the altercation, and I wanted nothing more than to run into the back office, lock the door, and cry. But I didn’t want Neil to see me in that kind of condition, so I forced myself to smile as if I wasn’t on the edge of losing it.

“Thank you. I probably could have handled it myself. But, thank you...”

Neil let out his breath as if he’d been holding it for a very long time.

“Yeah, sure. No problem.” He regarded me with a hesitant expression on his face, and then cleared his throat.

“What?” I asked.

“So,” he said casually. “You got a pack of matches and some lighter fluid behind the counter there?”

I could feel my face flush, and pretended to be interested in a coffee-stained receipt. With a shrug, I stammered out an explanation. “Uh, no. I don’t know how that happened. Maybe he had a cigarette butt in his sleeve or something that just finally ignited.”

*Lame.*

Neil opened his mouth to say something, but then reconsidered. He gestured to the telephone on the counter.

“You going to call the cops and report him? I can witness.”

“Wouldn’t do any good. Frank was right.”

“Oh?”

“Sheriff Burke is Barry’s father. If I called this in, the sheriff would be more likely to arrest me rather than Barry.”

Neil gave me a puzzled look.

“It’s a long story,” I told him. “I’m just sorry you had to see that. Some welcome to Middleton, huh?”

“Right.” He let out a dry laugh, then looked at me in concern. “Do you want me to hang out a bit, just in case they come back?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Barry’s a classic bully if you ever saw one. If it looks like he’s outgunned, he’ll run. He might come back, but it won’t be tonight.”

“You sure?” he asked.

“Yeah. You go on, get yourself settled. I’m about to lock up in a few minutes anyway.”

“All right, but I’m a light sleeper. If you need me—”

I waved him off. “I can handle it. But thanks. Hey, listen, I don’t want you to get the wrong idea about anything that was said here.”

“You mean about ... your parents?”

“It was an accident.” I sighed. “It was a long time ago. I was just a kid.” I squeezed my eyes together to stop the tears.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“It’s a very personal story, but if you’re going to be moving to Middleton, I’d rather you heard the truth than rumor.” I couldn’t believe how bold I was being. I could feel my face flush a deep scarlet as I said, “Maybe I can buy you a real cup of coffee sometime and tell you about it.”

Neil gave me a wide grin. “No problem. Sounds good.”

He took a step toward the door and turned on his heel. “Who is this Barry character, anyway, other than the sheriff’s son?”

Why did everyone always have to see me at my worst, and why did all my deepest regrets have to be out on display for everyone to gawk at? How could I expect to start my life over if everyone kept dredging up my past?

Reluctantly, I told him: “He’s my ex-husband.”

## Chapter Eight

**I was plagued** with dreams of fire and destruction. The nightmare was the same, but this time I could not wake from it.

I tossed and turned, kicked the sheets off me, and moaned. My skin was hot and feverish. I clutched at my chest.

“No!”

There was a sound like logs cracking in a bonfire, and the glass on my nightstand shattered into a thousand pieces, splashing me with cold water. The shock woke me and I jerked to a sitting position.

“It was an accident.” I breathed the words without realizing I said them.

It took me a moment to orient myself, wondering why my sheets were wet, and I couldn’t wrap my mind around the fact that someone was knocking impatiently on my door. A sliver of light penetrated through the drawn curtains of my room. A glance at my alarm clock told me it was still quite early in the morning.

The knocking at the door persisted, so I swung my legs out of the bed and fumbled for my jeans and shirt.

“What?” I barked.

The only reply was another demanding thump.

“Fine! I’m coming. Just hold your horses.”

Realizing I had put my shirt on backwards, I twisted it around and slid my arms back through the sleeves. I didn’t bother with socks or shoes, and padded barefoot to the door.

My stomach did a lazy flip-flop when I put one eye to the peep hole and saw Sheriff Burke.

“Shit.”

This was not going to be pleasant. I slapped the deadbolt back, cracked open the door and poked my head out.

“Darcy Anderson,” said Sheriff Burke, puffing his chest out and giving me a stern disapproving eye. He stood in front of his car, hands on hips and feet planted shoulder-width apart. His uniform was one size too small and his hat was one size too big. If I wasn’t so nervous, I would have laughed.

"I need to have a word with you," he said, and I could hear the venom in his voice.

"Sheriff?" I stepped outside my room, letting the door close behind me. The boards of the walkway were cold on my feet. "What's this about?"

I knew damned well what it was about, but ten years' experience with prison guards and their leading questions had taught me that feigning ignorance was the best defense.

"What's this about?" he parroted. "Well, for starters, how about not coming by the station upon arrival in Middleton to check in? I received a very unpleasant phone call this morning wondering why I hadn't filed my location report on you yet. I have to find out you're back in town from some ass-jerk bureaucrat in Phoenix. You know how that made me look? I have half a mind to place you under arrest for parole violation and send you back for another ten years."

I had to bite my tongue. "Sorry, Sheriff. I guess it sort of slipped my mind."

"And secondly," he continued, working himself up into a good rant. "I just spent the last half an hour listening to Frank Simmons tell me how you threw a pot of hot coffee in his face for no good reason."

"No reason?" I fumed. "Let me tell you—"

He waved a hand to shut me up. "I ain't interested in your lies. You're on thin ice as it is. The only reason you're not in lock-up right now is Frank and that half-wit Troy couldn't get their stories straight."

"I didn't throw any coffee at anyone."

"I said I don't care." He glared at me a moment longer to make sure I wasn't going to talk back. I pressed my lips together tight.

He pointed toward town. "All I care about is that you march your skinny little butt into my office no later than three o'clock today and fill out those damned location papers, or I swear by all that's holy you'll spend the rest of your miserable life behind bars where you belong."

I took a deep breath. I'd always known I would have to face Barry and his father at some point. If I couldn't control my emotions now, I never would, and I might as well pack my things and skip town. There would be no chance of rebuilding my life; I would forever be running from my past and myself.

*I am in control.*

At that moment, someone cleared their throat, and Uncle Edward stepped out of the maintenance room and leveled his not inconsiderable gaze at Sheriff Burke.

"Edward." Sheriff Burke's eyes flicked back and forth between my uncle and me. "I didn't see you there."

"Excuse me, Martin. I may not know much about the law, but I do know about



lines.”

“Lines?” The sheriff shifted his eyes to me and then back to my uncle.

Uncle Edward growled. “Yeah, like the one you’re crossing right now.”

“Oh,” the sheriff stammered. “I think you’ve got the wrong idea.”

“Do I?” Uncle Edward asked in a drawl.

In an attempt to maintain his dignity, Sheriff Burke inhaled deeply and affected an affable smile. “Of course! I just stopped by to check in with your niece. It’s my job, you know.”

“I know why you stopped by. Does it make you feel like a big man to push around a girl?”

“Now, listen here!” Sheriff Burke protested.

“If you want to blame someone for not following every letter of your law, then you go ahead and blame me.”

The sheriff looked like he was about to speak, but Uncle Edward put up a hand.

“I kept Darcy too busy the last couple of days working the motel. But I’ll personally make sure we stop by the station later today to fill out your precious little forms. How does that sound?”

There was a history between the two men that stretched back a lot further than when Sheriff Burke was my father-in-law. I had never gotten the whole story, and anytime I fished for a hint from my mother why the two bristled whenever they were in sight of one another, I was shushed and shooed away like a bothersome fly.

As if sensing that to continue pressing his point was not going to result in any positive outcome, Sheriff Burke backed down. “Well, just see that you do. I’ll be waiting.”

“Fine. You’d best be moving on, now.” Uncle Edward folded his arms over his chest.

Indignant, Sheriff Burke pointed a finger at me. “Thin ice.”

With a last glare at Uncle Edward, the sheriff turned on his heel and retreated to his squad car. He peeled out of the parking lot, sending up a shower of gravel behind him.

When the dust finally settled, Uncle Edward was still watching the road. “God-damned bully. Never could stomach the little weasel. Especially when he was family.”

“Uncle Edward, thank you.” There was sincerity in my voice, and that shocked me. I had long since come to the conclusion that the only person I could ever count on in this life was myself. Now, though, someone had stood up for me. It was incredibly comforting to know that, when push came to shove, there

was someone at your back.

Uncle Edward growled deep in his throat. “Thank me for what? I can’t have some busybody just come around here whenever they want and disrupt my employees. So just you never mind about it.”

He took two steps away in a huff, but then paused. “I heard the last part of what Martin said. Barry and his friends showed up last night, did they?”

“I can handle Barry,” I said, and I meant it.

“Maybe you can, but you don’t have to handle him by yourself. If he comes ’round again, you give me a holler and I’ll put a load of buckshot in that fat ass of his.”

With that, Uncle Edward stalked off, and when I called out another thank you after him, his only acknowledgement was a slight tilting of his head.

I watched him disappear into the main office without once looking back at me. Definitely, a tough nut to crack.

## Chapter Nine

**I slinked into** the Finer Diner, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as I could, and gasped. I would have turned and run right then, except someone else was entering right behind me and blocked my way.

The place was packed. Indistinguishable table talk, shouted orders from the servers to the cooks, the clanking of dishes, the sizzling of food on hot grills, and the cash register ringing all combined in a loud symphony of noise I had not expected.

I took a step forward to allow the couple behind me inside, and then tried to make good my escape.

A sharp voice pierced the babble.

Standing in the aisle a few tables down, a slender woman my age with jet black hair cut in a bob and dressed impeccably in a pantsuit pointed a well-manicured finger at me.

Everyone in the diner stopped their conversations and turned in my direction as Beth Longson hollered at me.

“Darcy Anderson, you unbelievable bitch!”

\* \* \*

After the fire that killed my parents, Middleton had become a media circus for a while. The story even made the national news. ‘Local woman kills parents in fiery blaze while they sleep.’ Reporters from both Flagstaff and Phoenix swarmed into our small town, interviewing locals and business owners to get their take on what happened.

‘Mentally unstable’, ‘pyromaniac’, ‘murderess’.

I’d been pretty much called them all. Speculation on why I had done it ran to all extremes: greed, wanting to collect insurance money; revenge for abuse; sociopathic tendencies finally manifesting. The list was endless.

For a time, the accusations, the persecutions in the court of the media, and the threats, both veiled and spoken, from people I had grown up with, overshadowed the real horror. My parents were dead and it was my fault.

It was an accident; I knew it deep in my heart, but it was of little consolation.

Like a motorist who takes their eyes off the road for a split second and runs over their own child riding a bike, or a construction worker on a high rise who slips and knocks a brick a hundred feet down on a colleague and long-time friend, crushing their skull; how can the knowledge that it wasn't intentional, that it was an accident, ever make up for the fact that those people are still dead by their hands?

In my case, no one believed it was an accident. It could have been the bad choices I made in my late teens. It could have been disbelief that there was no meaning in that horrific event. Or it could have been the overexposure of the news hounds looking for a hot topic that week—if you hear a story enough times, you might start to think there is truth in it. After all, where there's smoke, there's fire.

Whatever their reasons, or lack of reasons, the folks of Middleton did not show me very much kindness after the accident, nor throughout the trial, both in public and in court.

During my incarceration, I never received a word of encouragement or support from anyone in Middleton—other than my aunt and one other person: my best friend growing up, Beth Longson.

I don't know why I'd avoided telling her I was out and home again. Middleton was a small town and big news travelled fast. I was certain by now everyone knew I was back and working at the Lazy Z. Maybe it was just that gut fight-or-flight instinct everyone had, those butterflies you got just before going up on stage at a school play, or delaying when you had to deliver bad news. It's not that I didn't want to contact Beth, because I could have really used a friend, but there was always that nagging feeling at the back of my mind that, despite her assurances to the contrary, she didn't completely believe me either. My uncle was right: my argument for my innocence was not very convincing.

Not only had I been avoiding calling Beth or dropping by, but I had also avoided going anywhere but the Lazy Z.

Five days of virtual solitude, however, and I had grown tired of microwave lunches, and felt guilty for sponging dinners off Aunt Martha. It was past time to go out in the world, and my first stop was to get a hamburger at the Finer Diner. I had hoped to get in and get out without being noticed. Wishful thinking, I know.

The last person I expected to see was Beth.

\* \* \*

For a moment, I was completely shocked into immobility. The sudden

attention from dozens of sets of eyes unnerved me.

Beth was oblivious to the spectacle she had made of me, and her mouth broke out into a wide smile as she ran up and threw her arms around me.

“You evil woman! Why didn’t you tell me you were home?”

“Uh,” I answered, more than a little self-conscious from the sudden attention. Looking around, I saw most of the diners resuming their lunches and individual conversations as they realized there wasn’t going to be any drama. There were a few lingering looks as people struggled to recognize me, and I’m sure I heard a few people whisper my name.

I forced a smile back at Beth. “Well, I didn’t want anyone to make a fuss. I guess I just wanted to try and blend in somehow.”

Beth clucked her tongue. “Is that any way to treat your best friend? Here, come sit with us.”

“Us?”

She led me back to her table. Her husband, John, was shaking a rattle to amuse their baby. In a car seat on the table, the infant gurgled with delight. John puffed out his cheeks and then blew a raspberry at his son, who squealed with pleasure.

Beth flicked her hand at him as if shooing away a fly. “John, push over, let me in.”

John glanced up. Both his cheeks and the top of his balding head were flushed with the effort of entertaining the baby. “Oh, hey, Darcy! The guys down at the office said you were back. Why didn’t you come by and say hello?”

Beth slapped him on the shoulder, and he reacted as if it really hurt, but the look of agony on his face was clearly for dramatic effect.

Shaking her head, Beth admonished, “Don’t be so damned rude!”

“It’s all right,” I said as I slid into the booth opposite the two. “So this is John Jr.?”

I tried to pull a funny face for the baby, who didn’t know how to react to a stranger suddenly mugging in front of him, and seemed on the verge of throwing a fit.

Beth quickly shoved a bottle in his mouth. “Six months old. He’s finally sleeping through the night, thank God.”

“He’s a darling.”

A waitress I didn’t recognize stepped up beside us. “Can I get you anything, hun?”

Beth spoke up. “Anything she wants, and put it on our bill.”

I shook my head. “Oh, Beth, you don’t have to—”

“Don’t be stupid, Darcy. It’s the least we can do, after you cheated me out of

throwing you a welcome home party.”

“Well, if you insist.” I smiled. To the waitress, I said, “I’ll have a Burger Blaster and fries. And a coffee, please.”

She jotted down the information and retreated to the kitchen to place my order.

“Thank you,” I called after her

Beth made an indelicate snorting sound. “Blaster Burger, huh? Already tempting fate? That beast has been blamed for more than one coronary in town.”

“I need the taste of civilization, even if it kills me.”

John grunted. “Anything beats prison food, I guess.”

Beth whacked him on the shoulder again. “Jerk!”

“What?” John protested innocently as Beth rolled her eyes.

Watching the two of them banter like that made me smile. At the same time, I felt a pang of envy. During my brief marriage to Barry, I can’t remember a single time there had ever been any playful fighting. It had always been very real.

By the time my burger showed up, Beth had almost completely caught me up on town gossip; who was dating who, who was cheating on who, who was new—all the juicy stuff. I was thankful she never prodded into any details of my time in prison. I had always been sparse in my phone conversations and letters back to her, and I wasn’t entirely comfortable talking about it right now.

\* \* \*

In the parking lot, I watched with a mixture of amusement and sorrow as John fought with the safety belt of John Jr.’s child seat. Beth methodically stowed all the baby accessories in the back of the van.

“Thanks for lunch, Beth,” I said by way of conversation. “I owe you one.”

“No problems. So are you back for good, or just passing through?”

“No reflection on you, but my first instinct was to bolt. Cut and run. Get myself lost in a city somewhere. I had that choice.”

“Why didn’t you?” she asked me as I stared off into the distance.

“Believe me, I thought about it plenty. Talked it over with my reintegration counselor a hundred times. I figure no matter how fast I can run, the past can run faster. Might as well make a stand and face the music. It’s the only way to move on, the only way to prove that I’m more than what happened that night. And at least here I’ve got Aunt Martha and Uncle Edward.”

“And me,” said Beth. “I’m glad you’re back. I haven’t had anyone intelligent to talk to in ages.”

John, finally figuring out the seat belt, stood up sharply in protest. “Hey!”

Beth waved him off. "Love you, babes. Girl-talk going on here."

I laughed. "You're like a breath of fresh air, Beth. I didn't think I was ever going to fully get my life back, but—"

"Oh, don't get all mushy on me, girl. We've got plenty of time to worry over every thread. Hey, listen!" She jerked her thumb at her husband, who was sitting patiently in the driver's seat. "John's got to get back to work and I've got spinning class this afternoon—need to get rid of my baby bump. Why don't you drop by our place later? I usually put John Jr. down for his afternoon siesta about three."

"I'd love to," I said, "but I have to head down to the cop shop this afternoon, sign a million forms. And Uncle Edward has me working evening shifts at the motel. I usually start around three."

"Slave driver," she declared.

I let out a dry laugh. "It's like a picnic compared to prison, believe me."

"I do. Tell you what, I'll give you a call later at the Z and we'll figure it out from there."

She smiled warmly at me.

"Sounds good."

We hugged, and I thought I detected a tear in Beth's eye, which caused me to blink back one of my own.

Why are reunions so damned tough on the heart?

## Chapter Ten

**If I ever** needed courage it was on the short car ride to the police station. My stomach cramped up, I broke out in a cold sweat, and I wanted to jump from my uncle's moving truck and bolt.

Everyone makes mistakes in their lives. I happen to have cornered the market on that in my teen years. Don't ask me why I was such a rebel, but I started early: drinking, bush parties, skipping school, cussing and being a general nuisance to my parents, teachers, and pretty much anyone else who crossed my path.

I was raised with solid country values. Don't get me wrong, if I hadn't had that kind of upbringing, I might have gone much deeper in my downward spiral.

Maybe it was the redhead in me, maybe I inherited it from my mother—who ran away when she was nineteen (though that ended on a happy note when she met my father)—but I've always had a problem with restraint: I let my emotions get the better of me.

I think every teenager who lives in a small town has that same feeling as they approach adulthood: *Is this all there is to the world? This little slice of home-baked bread?* It can feel more than a bit confining if you imagine you will never break free of the tiny world in which you exist. I know I felt that way. And since I had a bit more of a wild streak than most, it manifested in my behavior.

It was about that time I fell in with the same crowd as Barry. I don't know whether it was because Barry and I were a lot alike, or because in my rebellious stage I knew dating him would really tick off my folks. Our paths merged into one, and for a while, I had the time of my life.

With his father as sheriff, we thought we could get away with anything short of murder, and we pushed the envelope until it broke. Barry had a hate-on for his father that scared me even back then. I think his mission in life was to send his old man straight over the falls.

Barry and I were the perfect match for annoying each other's parents, and it came to a head one night during our senior year when Barry got the bright idea of stealing his father's squad car and taking me to a rave he'd heard about going down outside of Big Park.



We had a blast right up until Barry—a dozen beers coursing through his system—wrapped the squad car around a tree on our way back.

Three days in a cold jail cell is a tough way to wait out a monster-sized hangover, and having Sheriff Burke yell at us at the top of his lungs every time he passed didn't improve our mood. The disappointment from my mother and father when they came in to check on me was worse.

We were teenagers then, and I guess there's something in us that doesn't see things the same way as adults. It was during those three days that Barry and I had the brilliant idea that the best way to get back at them was to get married, even though we had only graduated high school a month before.

Sheriff Burke was furious and never showed up at the ceremony. His hatred of me only ripened over the following six months of my marriage to Barry, and finally came to a head that fateful night when I nearly burned his son alive.

And now, I was going submissively into his territory like a criminal with a death sentence begging for a stay of execution.

\* \* \*

The police station itself was nothing more than a converted mobile home on its own lot. A flag on a tall pole in the middle of the lawn waved in the wind, and a blue and gold Middleton Sheriff sign stood to attention at the walk.

If Uncle Edward hadn't been there pulling me along by my elbow, I wouldn't have made it; I would have bolted and probably been sent back to prison for jumping parole.

I expected the worst, and silently repeated my mantra to myself. I was not going to lose control today. No way. I knew that the first sign of smoke would earn me a one-way ticket back to prison, and I did not want to go back there under any circumstances.

The station was quiet, except for the clacking of long nails on an old-fashioned typewriter. Maisy Bell, the receptionist who sat in a secretarial chair, looked up over her bifocals and pursed her lips when she recognized me. Without a word, she launched herself at a filing cabinet with a sharp push from her thick-soled shoes, hauled open a drawer, and pulled out a heavy folder.

"It's about time you showed up, missy," she said in sour voice, and scooted back to the counter, riding the chair like a bronco.

"I, uh—"

"Just fill these out." She handed me three forms and a sharpened pencil. "Make sure you fill in all the blanks. The sheriff will be with you when you're done."

With that, she went back to her typing as if I were no longer there.

Sheriff Burke's office door was closed, and the blinds covering the large pane window separating the office were also drawn, but I could see soft light through the cracks. He was there, I knew, but if he was aware that I had arrived then he was hiding it. I could handle him ignoring me, but if he was just drawing out the tension to play some kind of psychological game, then I had to have my wits about me.

I glanced at Uncle Edward, who looked like he'd just swallowed a bug.

I found a seat and put pencil to paper.

I honestly believe the only reason any office asks people to fill out forms is to give them something to do while they wait; a mundane task to take their minds off whatever it is they are there for. It worked for me, because, by the time I got to the last page, it completely slipped my mind where I was.

I nearly jumped out of my socks when a deep baritone voice barked out my name: "Darcy."

Sheriff Burke, master of his domain, shot Uncle Edward a challenging look. "Just her."

Uncle Edward, halfway up, pulled a face and sat back down again. He patted me on the shoulder. "You'll be fine. Just be straightforward and honest. No one can fault you for that."

"Thanks, Uncle Edward."

The butterflies were back, and they were in full flight. I was amazed I didn't pass out from anxiety before I entered the sheriff's stuffy office. He stood beside the open door and tracked my progress without blinking. When I slipped inside, he gestured to a chair and shut the door firmly behind me.

"Now, let's see your paperwork, Miss Anderson."

I handed over the forms. Sheriff Burke placed them on top of the stack of papers in my prison file.

"Sit down," he said. His eyes were studying the report, and he held a pen in his hand as if he were going to mark it for errors. When he noticed I was still standing, he looked up. His face clouded over. Maybe he was going to dress me down, read me the riot act and put me in my place. Whatever he planned on saying, I didn't want to hear it.

"I want to press charges," I said as evenly as I could.

My demand surprised him. He fixed his eyes on me. "What?"

"Assault and battery. Uttering death threats."

The sheriff sucked on his teeth. "Against who?"

"Barry."

He slapped his pen on the desk. "Bullshit."

“What’s bullshit, Sheriff? You know Barry as well as I do. You know what he’s like. He came to the Lazy Z looking for a fight. I was just minding my own —”

He stood up. “You tried to kill him! My boy! You lit a fire when he was in bed, sleeping.”

“That was years ago! And it was an accident!”

“Now that’s a barrel full of bullshit, and don’t try to tell me otherwise. I know Barry, and I know you.” He gestured at my file. “You’re both trouble and not one of you is more at fault than the other. And from what I hear, he went down there to make peace and it was you who got mouthy.”

“I never!” I clenched my fists.

He sneered. “Please! Spare me! Now don’t get yourself all twisted up. Sit down.” He raised his eyebrows. “Sit down, I said.”

Slowly, I complied. When he was satisfied that I was in my place, he resumed his seat.

“In the interest of peace,” he said, “I’ve decided to ignore both your complaints against each other. One complaint cancels the other out, if you get my meaning. Of course, if you’re too stubborn to accept that arrangement, I can just as easily file both complaints all legal and proper...”

He snapped his fingers. “Oh, that’s right—” He pointed at my folder. “—an assault complaint is always followed with formal charges. And correct me if I’m wrong, but if I arrest you, it’s a clear parole violation.” His smile held no humor. “Now, I ask you again, do you want me to push this through, and everyone goes down together? Or shall we all just let it pass?”

He had me in a corner, but gave me a way out. All I had to do was keep my mouth shut. I bit my tongue. What choice did I have?

“That’s what I thought,” he said with a smile. “I hope you realize I’ve done you a favor here when I didn’t have to.” His smile held no humor. “I want you to repay me that favor.”

I felt a sinking sensation, guessing what he wanted.

Sheriff Burke pushed the folder aside. “I’m willing to let your two transgressions go: the assault charge and failing to show up for a parole check. I’ll make you a deal. I want you out of my town. Forever. Just go and never come back; otherwise, I will dog your every move. You so much as fart too loud in a crowded room and I’ll have you up on charges and back to the penitentiary so fast your head will spin.”

Something in me stirred.

The sheriff continued, “You bring too many bad memories for too many people. Too many hard feelings. You tried to murder my boy, and I will never

forgive you for that. Wherever you go, trouble is going to follow, and I don't want any trouble in my town."

"Middleton is big enough for everyone," I said, standing up. "Just tell Barry to get off my back, and there won't be any trouble."

Sheriff Burke shot to his feet. "Is that a threat, Miss Anderson? Are you making threats?"

I could feel the heat rising in my hands and fingers. I ground my teeth. "No. No threat."

"Good. Now get your skinny ass out of here before I charge you for loitering."

I walked away, but at the door, I paused. "I'm not leaving town, Sheriff."

"One way or another, yes you are."

\* \* \*

It had gone pretty much as I expected. Even though I felt that rage grow when I was in the sheriff's office, I was proud of myself that I had maintained control. At least I wouldn't have to wash soot off my fingers.

Uncle Edward stumbled to his feet trying to catch up.

"What happened in there?" he asked.

I spoke in a monotone voice. "Nothing. Everything's fine."

"Don't try to pull the wool over this little lamb's eyes," he countered. Halfway down the walk, he grabbed my arm. "What was said?"

I stopped short and took a deep breath. "It's handled. We were very clear with each other where we stand. He wants me gone, and I'm not leaving."

Uncle Edward's face clouded over. "Ain't his place to say who stays and who goes. Maybe I should have a little talk with him."

"Look, Uncle Edward. It wouldn't do any good. There's too much bad blood between us. But as long as I keep my nose clean, he can't do anything. Straight and narrow, that's me. Like I said, it's handled."

He watched me for a second before nodding. Then he led me back to his pickup.

As I got in the truck, I spotted a black Camaro idling at the end of the street out of the corner of my eye. When I turned my head to get a better look, the driver gunned the engine and peeled out. It was Barry, and even from that distance, I could sense the malice and hatred.

Maybe it wasn't as handled as I had hoped.

Ten years. You would think that was enough time to get things in perspective and move on. Apparently, Barry couldn't put the past behind him, and had let the memory fester like a burn. Would it never heal?

It had been an accident, and I—more than anyone else—had to live with the pain of my memories on a daily basis. How could it not have been an accident? I never even knew, at that point, what power I had within me. How could I have suspected? How could I have controlled it? This affliction had been, and continued to be, a force unto itself.

Maybe it was a mistake to think I could ever have come home. The pain and anger was obviously still fresh after a decade. I had been here less than a week and I had already come close to losing control twice. Was I delusional in thinking I could maintain that control in the face of certain confrontation with Barry and his father? I wasn't sure if there was any way to diffuse this situation.

I had a decision to make, and I needed to make it soon.

## Chapter Eleven

**The next evening**, I was standing behind the counter of the Lazy Z, leafing through a news magazine and feeling sorry for myself, wondering if I should just pack it all up and move along.

When the phone rang, I nearly jumped out of my skin.

“Lazy Z Motel. How may I help you?”

“Hey, chicky. What’re you up to?”

It was Beth. I needed a friendly voice right now. My mood lightened immediately.

“Just hanging,” I said in a casual voice.

“Heard you had a bit of a rough night the other night—why didn’t you say anything?”

“Small towns!” I shook my head even though Beth couldn’t see me.

She said, “You know it! Barry’s a dick. But you can tell me all about it after work. What time are you off your shift?”

“Um.” I glanced at the clock. It was a quarter past ten. “Eleven.”

“Great! Get your fancy pants on and we’ll come by and pick you up in an hour.”

“Who’s we?” I asked. “And for what?”

“We is John and me. We got his mom to take John Jr. for the night. The *what* is The Trough. You’ve been pent up for ten years, girlfriend. Time to tie one on for old time’s sake.”

A sudden knot pulled at my stomach. “I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Why not?” asked Beth. “What else you gonna do on a Saturday night? Curl up with a good book and a hot bath? Ain’t gonna happen as long as I’m your best friend!”

“Well, the sheriff is kind of gunning for me. I don’t want to give him any excuse.”

“What,” Beth said, “it’s not like going to a bar is a parole violation ... or is it?”

“Well, one of my conditions is no alcohol.”

She scoffed. “Then we’ll order you a Shirley Temple. There’s nothing to stop

you from going to a bar and saying hello, is there? There's no law against dancing yet!"

"I guess that isn't one of my conditions. But, still—"

Beth's voice softened with concern. "You're not breaking any rules. It's Saturday night. What's the problem?"

I sighed. "Well, besides you, I haven't really felt welcome back in town. I thought I'd just lay low for a while, let everyone get used to me again."

"That's a load of crap, Darcy," she said. When I didn't reply, she added, "Hey, I already called everyone we know. Half our graduating class will be there. It'll be like a reunion."

*Ugh!* My gut twisted.

"Uh, Beth—"

She cut me off. "Hey, I'm not taking no for an answer. I'll give you until half past to grow a pair and get ready and then we're going to come calling. It's going to be a blast!"

But she had already hung up before I could launch another protest. I felt sick. I wasn't ready for this. There had been too much turmoil in the past few days, too much change. After ten years of routine and structure, I had changed from that adventurous rebel to a shy and withdrawn wallflower.

But that was one of the reasons I'd come home again, instead of building a new life in a different town: deep down, I wanted to find that girl of my youth. I wanted to turn back the dial, reset my life, put the car in reverse and make a course correction.

I wanted to start over, and hiding out in my uncle's motel wasn't getting me anywhere except more depressed and uncertain.

Going out tonight scared me half to death, but if I had a support system in Beth and John, I thought I would be all right.

If I wanted to stack the deck and improve my odds of getting through my first official night back into normal society, though, I needed to add one more element.

\* \* \*

I got as far as Neil's motel room door and raised my hand to knock, but then I hesitated. Chewing on my lip, I took a step back. Maybe I should just forget it.

That night when Barry showed up it had been chaotic, violent and confusing on many levels. I was sure I had left a lasting impression, but not the kind I would have liked.

Neil probably thought I was a nut case. Having a public fight with my ex-

husband wouldn't help his opinion of me. I was sure he was just being valiant and polite when he offered to buy me a cup of coffee some time. I'm not sure that I would be so keen on seeing someone with so much obvious baggage.

I turned on my heel, deciding it was best to slink off into the night, when the room door opened. Framed in the doorway, Neil stood in only a pair of boxers and nothing else. I had a hard time taking my eyes off his sculpted chest.

His hair was disheveled from sleeping, and he rubbed one eye with the back of his hand.

"Darcy?"

Blushing, I forced a smile. "Hi!"

A puzzled look passed over his face before he returned the smile. "Uh, hi."

"Did I wake you? I thought you said you never slept." Inside, I was kicking myself for being so lame.

"I'm a light sleeper. It helps when you work nights. No, I love to sleep."

"Oh, sorry. I'll let you get back—"

"Was there something you wanted?" he asked, forestalling my retreat.

"Well, I just got a call from one of my friends and she's making me go out tonight, and I just thought..."

His half-smile turned into a grin. "I'd love to!"

"Really?" I asked.

"Sure! What time?"

"Beth's going to pick me up in about an hour."

Neil smiled. "Enough time for me to grab a shower. Hey, thanks for the invite!"

"Oh, you don't have to thank me." I could actually feel the heat rise on my cheeks. I felt like I was at my first junior high dance. "You're actually doing me a favor."

Neil cocked his head in question and I waved him off.

"Never mind," I said with a smile. "It's nothing. I'll see you in an hour."

Grinning like an idiot, I practically flounced back to the office.

\* \* \*

After showering and applying my makeup, I barely had time to finish drying my hair before someone knocked on my door. Still dressed in my bathrobe, I raced breathlessly to answer it. I hoped it wasn't Neil yet; and at the same time, I hoped it was him.

It was Beth. Behind her in the parking lot, John sat in their minivan and waved at me with a lunatic grin.



Beth's smile transformed into a frown. "Why aren't you dressed?"

"Uh..." I looked down at myself and threw my hands up in helplessness. "All my clothes are ten years out of fashion."

"Not a problem." She ushered me into the room. "Let's see what we have to work with."

I closed the door behind us, leaving John outside waiting in the van.

Beth was already rifling through my dresser and closet, throwing articles of clothing here and there on the bed and mumbling to herself. "Ack! Yuk! Oh, my!"

Feeling self-conscious, I wrapped my robe tighter around my shoulders. "I haven't had time to go shopping. Really!"

She shot me a withering look. "A girl's got to have priorities. That's next on our list. For tonight, though, this will have to do."

It was my turn to be appalled. "That?"

She took a second look at the outfit, then nodded. "Yeah, that."

I pointed at it, my eyes wide. "I was going to throw that away."

"Don't you dare! You'll look hot in this."

"It's too short," I said. "I hate miniskirts. I'm too old for that now."

Beth made a face. "Gawd, would you listen to yourself. Just put it on. I guarantee you'll get lucky tonight." She clicked her tongue and winked.

I picked up the black miniskirt and held it to my waist, wondering how much thigh would show.

"Beth, I guess I forgot to tell you..."

"What?" she asked as she flipped through a few more articles of my clothing.

I chewed on my lip. "I kind of invited someone to go along. I hope that's all right."

"All right?" Beth practically shrieked for joy. "That's great! That's the Darcy I know and love. Not in town a week and you've already got them lining up."

"Shut up! It's nothing serious. Just a guy I met the other night, a guest here. Well, actually, he's moving to town. Moved. He got hired as the new fire chief. Or he will be." I hated it when I was tongue-tied.

"Oh ho! You move quick. Gotta be careful around you. Do tell." Beth held another blouse up to me to see if it would match. She tossed that one and searched for a more suitable candidate.

"Well, nothing much to tell," I said. Then added in a lower voice, "He was here when Barry came in."

Beth frowned. "Oh."

"Yeah. And he saw the entire fight."

"You must have been devastated," she said, reaching out for my arm. Then

she brightened. "But he still agreed to go out with you? He must have it bad for you!" She teased me with a scandalous look.

"Would you *stop*?" She had an uncanny ability to make me blush at the drop of a hat.

"Never." Beth laughed and held up the final selection against my shoulders. "That's the one. Now we just need to accessorize." She waved at my robe. "Get out of that rag."

\* \* \*

Outside, dressed to the nines, I started to feel like a person again. Was this what normal felt like? John stuck his head out the window of the minivan and whistled a catcall.

Beth barked out, "John, quit being such an ass," but she was smiling when she said it. I blushed despite myself, pleased at the compliment.

John glanced at something behind us, and Beth and I turned as one.

"Meow," Beth commented. And when John opened his mouth to protest, she said, "Love you, babes!" But her attention, and mine, was on Neil.

In an obvious attempt to blend in with the local population, he wore a western shirt, tight blue jeans and a belt buckle. If he had worn a cowboy hat and boots, I probably would have laughed, but I found myself holding my breath as he sauntered our way. His playful smile faltered when he saw us staring.

"What? Too much?" he asked.

Beth raised her eyebrows. "Not at all! You must be Neil." She held her hand out and they shook. "I'm Beth."

"Please to meet you." Neil took a step to the side and shook John's hand.

"That's my husband, John. He's an accountant."

"Heya," John said by way of greeting. "You new in town, or passing through?"

Beth exclaimed, "John, don't you have any couth?"

John made an innocent face. "What?"

Neil laughed. "Just moved here," he said to John. "I'll be working for the fire department."

"Excellent!" said John. "I do the accounting for them. I'm at the fire hall at least once a week. Great group of guys there."

Beth gave me a knowing glance. "Well, if you two boys can tear yourselves away from each other, we should get going."

Everyone piled into the minivan.

## Chapter Twelve

**I thought I** was ready for it. I had three staunch supporters to back me up, but the moment I stepped into the bar, the overly loud music from the live band stopped me short.

The crowd pressed in on me, and a dozen heads turned in my direction, their looks hostile and accusing. A few people yelled at me. I suddenly wanted to be anywhere besides The Trough, but Beth grabbed my shoulders and firmly guided me all the way inside the bar.

“It’s all right,” she said. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I had to remind myself that I was in control, and nothing could affect me. My reintegration counselor had told me there might be times like these. I just had to take a mental step back and assess the situation objectively. Letting out my breath, I forced myself to relax and smile.

Once I was back in control, I looked around again. Now those people looking at me wore smiles rather than grimaces, I saw. The yells were shouts of greetings. The counselor had been right: it was just my insecurity and imagination getting the better of me.

“Come on,” said Beth. “Let’s go say hello.”

She grabbed me by the wrist and led me toward a group of our former high school classmates.

I shook hands with Arlene Kent, who had sat in front of me in algebra and occasionally let me peek at her homework. She introduced me to her husband, Willem Nelson. Back then, he had been on the football team; now he was balding and sported a hefty waistline. He told me he’d bought the used car dealership in town, and handed me his card. I thought he was a jerk back then, and my opinion of him hadn’t improved over time.

Francine Messerly was one of those girls who flounced when they walked. In junior high, she had always volunteered for the spirit club and decoration committee. I found out she was twice divorced.

“I’m at a point in my life where I’m very happy to be single,” she told me. Her eyes, however, continually scanned the crowd; I assumed looking for new marriage prospects.

After a few more meets and greets, I began to loosen up. Now John and Neil were the ones looking out of place. John was a few years older than Beth and didn't know her friends very well; and Neil, of course, didn't know anyone.

Once the novelty of me wore off, I shouted to the three of them above the din, "Maybe we should get a table or something."

Beth nodded and motioned for John to arrange it. With his bulk, he pushed through the crowd and we found an unoccupied table.

Neil pulled a chair out for me. I blushed and muttered a thank you that he couldn't possibly hear.

Beth leaned over to me. "See, wasn't so bad. Everyone was happy to see you. Only a few bad apples in the barrel."

A waitress appeared. "What can I get you?"

John called out, "Beer! Bring a jug. First round's on me."

"Not for me," I said. "Against the rules."

I smiled up at the waitress. "Just water for me."

John glanced at Neil, who nodded and said, "I'll get the next round."

"You got it."

Beth tapped me on the shoulder. When I turned, she pointed at a middle-aged woman I recognized talking to a much younger man I didn't.

"Check out Mrs. Haverstad," Beth jeered at our old high school social teacher. I could hear the woman's laughter from across the noisy bar. "Or should I say, 'Ms.' Haverstad."

I raised my brows. "What, she got divorced from Bill?"

Beth nodded. "Yup. Dumped her like yesterday's trash. Now she's turned into the town cougar. Shameless." She pointed to another woman. "Oh, there's Charlotte Baker. You remember her?"

I remembered throwing up on her five-hundred-dollar shoes at a bush party when I was seventeen. After that, I don't think we spoke more than two words the rest of high school.

"I'm not her favorite person," I said.

"She's in my spinning class. I'm going to go over and say hi. Wanna come?"

"Uh," I said uncertainly. "Maybe another time."

Beth flashed a smile and, with a wink, sashayed in Charlotte's direction.

John and Neil were already well into the get-to-know-each-other phase.

"How long you been a firefighter?" John asked Neil.

"Going on fifteen years now. Joined up right after high school."

John nodded. "Must be pretty exciting."

The waitress arrived with a tray of frosted glasses and a pitcher of beer. She set them down on the table as John counted out the bill and a generous tip.

“Thanks, sugar,” she said to John. I could have sworn she was looking at Neil, though.

John poured the beer and the two raised their glasses in salute. Neil only sipped while John downed his in one long pull.

“I couldn’t do anything like that,” John said as he poured himself another. “Too much excitement. I like safe and quiet. An accountant’s life is stable and predictable; just the way I like it.”

To my ears, it sounded like he was trying to convince himself more than anyone else.

“So,” John said to Neil, “what made you decide to become a firefighter?”

“Long story—”

A hush settled over the other end of the bar.

“Oh, shit,” I said, and my stomach twisted when I glanced in that direction. The feeling of camaraderie I had started to enjoy disappeared in an instant.

Barry, Frank and Troy swaggered into The Trough like they owned the place.

“What?” Neil followed my gaze, and lowered his brows. He put a hand on my arm, and that simple gesture helped to center me.

The bartender, old Jack Creel, came out from behind the counter and motioned for the three of them to leave. Looking at Jack, you would think he’d get knocked over by a stiff breeze, but despite his age and lanky physique, he was fast and vicious in a fight, often taking down men twice his size.

I couldn’t hear what they said, but I could guess. I knew Barry, and I knew he could be charming and disarming when he wanted to. He put his bandaged hands up in an ‘I don’t want to make trouble’ gesture and smiled like a saint.

Jack shook his head, but after they exchanged more words, he finally shrugged and returned to his barkeeping duties. Barry and his friends found a table at the other side of the dance floor. I knew he knew I was there, though he studiously avoided looking in my direction while he found his seat. Just a good old boy, he ordered a round of drinks from the waitress who floated by. Frank cracked a joke, and all three laughed.

“Darcy, you’re going to bust a nail.” I glanced up at Beth, who had returned to the table. She was looking at my hands, which were clutching the edge of the table so hard my knuckles were white.

I forced myself to relax my grip. “Maybe we should leave. This was a bad idea.”

“Don’t be stupid,” said Beth. “We have just as much right to be here as he does.”

I wrung my hands. “I don’t know.”

“I do. There’s no way you’re getting out of here without a fight, princess.”

Beth gave Neil a playful smack on the arm. "If you don't ask her to dance soon, I'll make you dance with me. I warn you, I have high heels and no sense of rhythm."

Neil blushed a deep red, and suddenly the tension drained from me. His embarrassment made me like him more. At the same time, I felt more than a little self-conscious.

"Beth," I admonished her. "I'm not sure—"

"I warned you. If you don't dance with him, I will!" She grabbed Neil by the wrist and pulled him out of his seat. With a helpless look on his face, he let Beth drag him to the dance floor. Joining the few other couples already attempting a line dance, the two fell into position and, with only a few missteps, got into the swing of things.

John leaned over to me, his eyes full of laughter. "Are you going to help me make my wife jealous? Come on!"

I took a sip of water and stood. "Absolutely."

"Yeah! That's more like it."

We stepped into line and followed along. It was like I had sea legs, and I'm sure I looked like an idiot, but for a few minutes all my cares drained away. I was surprised to hear my own laughter.

John spun me around. I almost lost my balance, but Beth grabbed me before I spilled over into someone's table.

"You home wrecker!" she called out to me with a smile. "Give me my husband back!"

I laughed, and Beth and I switched positions. I partnered up with Neil. He was grinning like a fool, obviously enjoying himself.

The band ended the song on a high note, and immediately started a waltz. I took a step back toward the table, but Neil took my hand and pulled me in for a slow dance.

I closed my eyes, burying my head in Neil's chest and basked in the security of his embrace. The rhythm of the music and the ebb and sway of our dancing was hypnotizing, and I felt all my cares drain away.

When Neil was suddenly wrenched away from me, I cried out in surprise. It took me a few moments to get my wits about me.

"That's my wife you're dancing with, bastard!" Barry, his fists clenched, had murder in his eyes as he stared Neil down.

My shock instantly turned to rage. "I'm not your wife anymore, Barry. Why can't you just leave me alone?"

He pointed an accusing finger at me. "We took a vow. And like the man said, you're mine until death do us part. Now you're going to dance with me and

you're going to like it." With that, he reached out to grab my arm.

Lightning quick, Neil deflected his advance and then followed up with a strong shove.

"You heard the lady," he said. "She doesn't want anything to do with you."

Barry smiled disarmingly and raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. From experience, I knew what was coming next and called out a warning. Neil had already dropped his guard though, and Barry lashed out with a brutal roundhouse to Neil's jaw, sending him flying back against the crowd that had gathered to watch.

"Neil!" I cried, but before I could run over to see if he was all right, Barry backhanded me across the face. Stars exploded in my head. The blow didn't quite knock me off my feet, and I caught myself and stood my ground.

"That's for disrespecting me, bitch!" Barry said.

I put my hand to my burning cheek and narrowed my eyes at him. A tingling sensation started at the tips of my fingers and spread inch by inch up through my hands. My stomach cramped; the power wanted out. At that point, I *wanted* to release it. The air around me crackled and I could feel the hairs on my arm stand up.

The temperature in the room was rising, but no one seemed to notice: all eyes were on the unfolding drama.

"You wipe that look off your face," Barry said through clenched teeth, "or I'll wipe it off for you."

I vibrated with the effort to retain control.

A beer bottle shattered in someone's hand, and a woman gasped as her martini boiled in her hand. Several more drinks exploded or fell to the ground and smashed.

People exclaimed, but no one had any idea I was the cause.

Halfway across the room, a man leaped out of his chair with a curse, a tendril of smoke curling from his suddenly overheated backrest.

Neil was on his feet and rushed to put himself between Barry and me.

"Darcy, are you all right?" he asked, concern chiseled into his eyes. Barry, unable to comprehend what was happening in the bar, took a step back. "What the hell is going on?"

"My eyes can see," I said.

Neil turned his head. "What?"

"My tongue can taste."

"What?" he said to me.

Just then, Barry grabbed Neil's shoulder and pulled him away. "What kind of crap is—?"

But as Neil spun, he made a fist, put all of his momentum behind it, and punched Barry square in the face.

Blood gushed from Barry's nose and he windmilled his arms to keep from falling on his backside. A veteran of dozens of fistfights, Barry powered through the pain, recovered quickly, and charged.

Before he got more than a step, Jack Creel and one of his bouncers intercepted. Barry tried to break away, but old Jack growled at him and pointed to the door.

"That's it, Barry," Jack growled. "You're out of here. And if you don't leave now, I'll ban you for good!"

Frank and Troy rushed in to save their friend.

"We got him," Frank said. The two of them dragged Barry away.

"This ain't over," Barry yelled at me from the door. "I promise you that. And you know I keep my promises."

Once the trio was safely off the premises, the bartender and his staff set about cleaning up the mess on the dance floor. Jack signaled the band to resume their set and gradually, everything returned to normal.

Everyone seemed completely unaware how close they had come to disaster. I had lost control for a brief moment.

I let Beth pull me back to the table. I was appalled at myself.

"Hey, that was a pretty good punch, Neil," John said in a shaky voice as the two followed behind. "Both the giving and the taking."

"Shut up, John," said Beth. She was staring at me as if expecting me to burst into tears at any moment. The truth was I was very close to it. Beth put her arms around me in a hug.

"Come on, honey," she said in a calming voice. "Sit down. Have something to drink."

She held my glass of water to my mouth, and I automatically grabbed it and took a sip. The left side of my face was growing numb from Barry's hand.

I said, "I think we should go."

"Don't be stupid," Beth countered. "Barry's gone; he won't be back. Don't let that ass ruin the rest of our evening. Look, everyone's moving on as if it never happened."

But they weren't. I could tell. Nervous eyes darted in my direction from all corners of the room. There was no way anyone could lay blame on me for shattered glasses and spilled drinks. In the heat of battle, events can be confusing. Your mind plays with timelines if it can't remember exactly the sequence of events. And without facts to fill in the blanks, imagination and rumor takes over.



*There's the girl who killed her folks. Everywhere she goes trouble follows.*

And then there was Neil. Only he and Barry had seen the look on my face as the power overcame me, as I lost control of the fire inside. What would he think of me? That was twice now that he'd seen me at my worst.

Furtively, I glanced up at him. There was an inscrutable look on his face.

It was all too much for me to process, and I couldn't think with everyone looking at me. I needed to get away and be alone.

"Beth, I think I've had enough excitement for one night. Can you get John to take me home?"

She fixed me with a level gaze, and then finally shook her head.

"Nonsense," she declared. "We'll all go together."

We gathered our purses and filed out of the bar.

Neil was silent on the trip home. He rubbed his jaw a few times, and winced whenever he poked a particularly sensitive spot. I didn't initiate any conversation and neither did he. I was far too vulnerable and uncertain, and I didn't want to hear what he thought about me. His impression of me was certainly colored by now, and I wouldn't blame him if he never wanted to talk to me again. Whenever he and I were together, he ended up in a fight. That was two strikes against me, and I wasn't sure I was up to chancing a third.

When we reached the motel, Beth stepped out of the van and gave me a hug.

"You going to be all right?"

I put my hand to my face. It had to be blazing red by now. "Yeah. Maybe a pack of ice and a few aspirins."

She gingerly touched my cheek. "No, I meant about Barry."

"I know. I almost think I should never have come back."

"Don't talk like that," she told me. "Listen—get a good night's sleep. I'll come over tomorrow and we can hash this through. We'll figure something out. Don't stress. You know you'll always have me."

"Thanks, Beth."

I gave her a firm hug, and stepped back as she got into the van. With a wave, John smiled and put the vehicle into gear.

When they were gone, I slowly turned to Neil, who waited a few steps away. His eyes were smiling gently, but his lips were drawn tight.

"You must think the worst of me," I finally said. "A walking disaster."

"Hey, no. This isn't your fault at all. It's not like you went looking for trouble."

"No, I don't have to," I said in a dry voice. "I'm like a magnet for trouble."

"I know it's easier said than done, but you can't let it get to you." He gave me a look of deep concern.

“Yeah.” I took half a step closer to him, then changed my mind and stepped back.

“Look,” he said, and was brave enough to close the gap between us and put his hands on my arms. “Maybe you just need some time to work this through. I’d still like to buy you that cup of coffee.”

I laughed, though it sounded dry to my ears. “Thanks. I guess I just need to sort things out. Hey, and thanks for coming to my rescue again.”

“Not at all.” This time both his eyes and his mouth smiled. “I think I’m going to take your advice,” he said. “A couple of ice packs would do me good.”

He didn’t kiss me goodnight, and that was a good thing. In my frame of mind, I would probably have reacted badly. At that moment, I needed friends more than anything, and knowing that I had Beth and John, and now Neil, on my side might have been just enough to get me through the next few days.

But it wasn’t enough. After Neil gave my arms a final squeeze and went inside, I raced to my room and pulled the duffel back out of my closet.

In no time, I had all my clothes and toiletries packed.

\* \* \*

I had two choices, when it came down to it. If I stayed in Middleton, Barry would never leave me alone. This farce would continue until one or the other of us was in jail, the hospital, or the morgue. Bullies invariably backed down when they knew they couldn’t get their own way with force. But Barry had gone beyond this; he had come to a point where he was ruled by animal jealousy.

Staying meant disaster, and that was a certainty. Or I could hit the road and try to build a life somewhere else; start over. It meant leaving behind my friends, abandoning what was left of my family, and that was the toughest part of it. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I packed, but I knew I was making the right decision.

With a deep sob, I wiped the tears from my eyes, threw on my jacket, and walked out.

I got three steps into the parking lot when a familiar voice sliced through the night and stopped me dead in my tracks.

## Chapter Thirteen

**“So you’re just** going to cut and run?” Aunt Martha asked me, her voice tight. I could sense her disappointment, and for that I felt a deep shame.

She sat on the wooden bench outside the office that Uncle Edward had hand-carved twenty years ago. Wearing a light red jacket over her nightgown to protect her from the chill air, she looked homey and comforting. Narrowed eyes and pursed lips told me she was anything but relaxed.

In her hands she held two steaming mugs.

Tentatively, I approached the bench. Aunt Martha scooted over and made room for me. When I sat down with a heavy sigh, she handed me a mug. It was hot chocolate—with marshmallows.

A teardrop fell into my drink; I wiped the next one away with the back of my hand.

“It’s just too hard, Aunt Martha. It’s not working out.”

“Pish-posh,” she declared. “What’s life without a little adversity?”

When I glanced up at her, her eyes had softened. She winked and took a sip of hot chocolate.

I said, “You have no idea what happened tonight.”

“I don’t?” she asked. But I could see in her face that she did. The corner of her mouth lifted in a smile. “No need for a newspaper in a small town,” she said.

“What do you mean?” I asked, alarmed. I could only guess what she had heard.

Aunt Martha said, “I’ve known old Jack Creel for years. He called not ten minutes ago.”

“What did he say?”

The hot chocolate was cooling quickly in the night air, so I gulped it down before it got too cold.

“He said you were pretty much minding your own business, just having fun with your friends, and Barry showed up and made an ass of himself again.”

“Yeah. I kick myself every time he comes around. Whatever possessed me to marry that jerk...?”

“Your mother was impetuous when she was a teenager,” said Aunt Martha.

“Trouble was her middle name, and you inherited that. There’s a wild streak runs through your side of the family.”

“Not Uncle Edward—”

“No. He’s the total opposite of his sister.” She shook her head and smiled. “When she spent that summer away, I’m sure your grandparents were as much relieved as they were distraught.”

A maudlin silence hung between us then as we remembered my mother. The conversation wasn’t helping me; I was feeling even more downhearted than after the run-in with Barry.

“So, tell me,” Aunt Martha said in a measured voice. “What else happened tonight?”

A cold chill ran down my spine. “What do you mean? With Neil?”

“No, though anytime you want to have a birds and bees talk, or even a gossip, I’m not too old to chew the fat. No, I meant with Barry.”

There was a very distinct and recognizable tone in her voice. She always used that tone when she knew the answer to a question before she even asked it.

My gut cramped. Did she know my secret? Of course she wasn’t talking about that, I told myself. How could she know?

I raced through my memories, searching for any sign or reference that Aunt Martha knew about this power that had afflicted me for the past ten years. As far as I could remember, I had not breathed a word of this thing inside me to any living soul except one: my cellmate, Kyra Michelson, and she had taken my secret to the grave.

No. Aunt Martha had no clue about my inner demons. I had admitted nothing during the trial. I said nothing when I set Barry’s wrists on fire the night before last, and I had kept silent about the shattered glasses and boiling drinks at the bar tonight. I had kept my mouth shut every time I’d had a flare up. I took the label ‘firebug’ and didn’t deny it. At least with a pyromaniac there was a natural explanation for what they did. In my case, I had no explanation for what made me do the things I did.

Aunt Martha was a good soul. If she had any idea of the destruction I had caused, or was capable of committing, she would turn me right back in to the authorities. Who wouldn’t?

“What do you mean, with Barry?” I asked.

“Old Jack. If there’s one thing you can say about him, he never exaggerates. If anything, he’s known for his lack of detail. I remember once he had a cast on his arm. When I asked him what happened, he just said, ‘Got me a cast.’ I asked why he got a cast and he said, ‘Broke my arm, why else would I get a cast?’ So when he kept on and on tonight about your little to-do with Barry, I knew he

wasn't making it up."

"...Oh?"

"Yeah," she said. "Glasses don't burst and shatter unless they're dropped, or if some opera singer screams her head off. Or if it reaches a certain heat."

"Aunt Martha—"

"Plus I heard about the other night, and I saw the bandages on Barry's hands earlier today when I went grocery shopping."

My mind raced. "I—"

"And I know, deep in my soul, it wasn't your fault what happened to your parents."

I couldn't breathe. My mouth opened, but there was no air in my lungs to make the words come out.

Aunt Martha said, "I had hoped it would skip you. But I guess not. Darcy, I think it's time you knew some of your family's history."

"What?" My mind raced in a hundred directions.

"Now, your Uncle Edward, bless his soul, has no clue about this, and it doesn't concern him. So what I tell you here stays between us. All right?"

"Yeah."

"Don't ask me if it's genetics or any of that scientific stuff," she said. "I don't know for sure one way or another; I only know what I've been told and what I've read. Your family bloodline is ... special. It doesn't happen in every generation, but once in a while, certain circumstances arise and..."

She took a sip of her hot chocolate while she considered her words. "Maybe it's the hand of God, or the Devil. Maybe it's a blessing, or a curse. Maybe it's just a quirk of nature. I don't know."

"My mother—"

"Whatever it is, it didn't happen to your mother or uncle. It didn't happen to your grandmother. But *her* mother had an ability not found in normal folk."

I blinked. "My great-grandmother? She died before I was born. In her sleep."

"That's right." Aunt Martha nodded.

I searched my memory. "My mom talked about her some. But I never heard anything ... about any affliction she had."

This was the first time I had heard about or even imagined anyone else having this power. At the best of times I found it hard to believe that I had this condition; more than once I thought I was simply insane and my mind was making this up because I couldn't face the truth. Hearing that someone else—a member of my family, no less—shared this burden was even more difficult to believe. Half of me thought I had stepped into a nightmare of my own making. This thing affected other people?

“Ability,” Aunt Martha corrected me. “She managed to control it; and she kept the secret to herself. Well, mostly.”

“How do you know about this?”

Aunt Martha lifted her mug and finished the last of her drink. After wiping her lips with the back of her sleeve, she answered me.

“Your mother made me promise to keep it a secret. You see, after you were born, her mother told her a story; and before that, after your grandmother had your mother, your great-grandmother told her. And that’s how it’s been.

“Ellie didn’t believe a word of it, of course. But after your grandmother died, when she was helping clean out your grandparents’ attic, she found an old tattered journal. Your great-grandmother, Beatrice, had written in it since she was a girl.”

“Where is it now?” I asked, barely able to contain my excitement.

“It was in your house *that* night. I’m sorry.”

Destroyed. For a moment, there had been a glimmer of hope that I might get some answers. But with the journal incinerated, I was back to square one.

“After reading it,” Aunt Martha continued, “Ellie realized that the story had been true all along. But by then, you were already born. Your mother showed no signs of the ability, but she was afraid for you. Since we were close, she felt she could confide in me.”

“Confide what?” I was practically jumping out of my skin.

“She called it ‘angel’s fire,’ your great-grandmother did. Very religious woman, Beatrice was. She believed she was being punished by a fallen angel.”

“An angel?” I said in a low voice, watching Aunt Martha’s reaction. I could never tell if she truly believed in hellfire and all that nonsense. I always thought those religious stories were more like morality tales told to children.

Aunt Martha said, “From what your mother told me, if someone in your family line is going to develop the ability, it only happens under very specific circumstances.”

I struggled to absorb all this new information. “What circumstances?”

“In her journal,” she told me, “Beatrice wrote something along the lines of ‘When the bond of blood is broken, a fallen angel will rise to punish the offender.’ I can’t remember it word for word.”

I had a sinking sensation, a flash of vertigo, when my brain made the connection.

Aunt Martha had dropped breadcrumbs one by one, hoping it would lead me to the conclusion. I had never even thought about it before; but the connection was crystal clear.

The bond of blood. Not my parents. They were alive when the power sprang

out of me. That bond was broken before the fire...

“Oh, God,” I said.

“I suspected it. It’s true, isn’t it?” she asked me, never taking her eyes off me for a moment.

“Yeah.” My voice was tiny, weak, despairing.

Aunt Martha leaned over and wrapped her thick arms around me, pulled me into her deep bosom. “Oh, child, I’m so sorry.”

But I could not respond through the sudden flood of tears.

## Chapter Fourteen

**The night air** bit through our clothes, and when my sobs turned to an occasional snuffle, Aunt Martha led me around the motel to the bungalow and into the kitchen.

I left my duffel bag at the door.

Once she had me tucked into a wide-winged sofa, she threw a quilt over me, handed me a cup of herbal tea and listened as I spilled my guts.

\* \* \*

I've painted Barry with a very harsh brush, and he had become every bit the caricature of a jealous man there was. But to be fair, he'd had some good qualities that initially attracted me to him. Aside from my youthful rebellion, I wasn't stupid enough to marry him based solely on what kind of reaction I could get out of my folks.

For example, one night at a house party, I had one too many beers and Barry held my hair back while I puked in the toilet for half an hour. I was very grateful for that.

He'd bought a beat up old Sprint with money from his first summer job when he was sixteen, and since I'd never bothered to get my driver's license, I made Barry taxi me everywhere. Even when I got him to drive Beth and me to the city once a month to go shopping, he did it, and quietly followed along behind us while we flitted from store to store.

When Mr. Scotts gave me a failing grade on my mid-term biology exam—even though I knew I got most of the answers right—and I cried about showing my results to my parents, Barry let the air out of the old coot's tires every day for a week. That act might say more about Barry's skewed sense of justice than his protectiveness toward me, but at the time, I thought it was very chivalrous and romantic.

Barry had had more than a few strikes against him. He grew up under the shadow of an overbearing father, and nothing he did was good enough for his old man. Barry had developed a bad case of low self-esteem and had a major chip on his shoulder. In school, he always squeaked by on his grades, and pretended he



didn't care, but if anyone teased him about it, he would grow dark and sullen.

For Barry, the resentment toward his disapproving dad and his lack of confidence had manifested physically whenever anyone challenged him. I'd even seen him punch out Frank's lights one time when Barry said he had to go help his uncle put up some 'bob wire.' Frank laughed at the mispronunciation, and Barry had turned bright red with embarrassment before laying a sound beating on his friend.

Barry's mother left in the middle of the night when he was two, and no one had any idea where she'd gone. I made the mistake of feeling sorry for him one time when he told me the story, and he growled that he was better off without her.

Maybe I felt he needed me in his life; that I could somehow save him, and make him a better person. Whatever misguided feelings we had for each other, it inevitably led us to a justice of the peace less than a month after high school graduation.

The first couple of months after I married Barry, we had a blast. We were teenagers pretending to be adults; but we didn't have a clue about responsibility or commitment or about the harsh realities of life outside of school.

On the outs from his father over the elopement, Barry got a job as a loader at the meat packing plant south of town. That's where he first started hanging around Frank and Troy. I worked nights at the Fast & Friendly convenience store, and together, we made enough to put down first and last month's rent on one of Mr. Cromley's mobile homes in the Verde Vista Trailer Park.

Once a week we'd have Frank, Troy and some of the other guys from Barry's job over, along with some of our friends from high school, and we'd party until the neighbors complained.

After a couple weeks of this, Mr. Cromley showed up at the door one morning and woke me with his hammering on the door. Fat and balding, he glared at me through his thick glasses and gave me an ultimatum: keep the noise down, or find a new place to live.

Barry didn't take the news well when he got home that night and tracked Mr. Cromley down at his home. Sheriff Burke showed up after Mrs. Cromley had enough of the shouting, and was worried Barry might hurt her husband.

Barry's father made him cool his heels overnight in his more than familiar jail cell.

As a result, Barry was late for work—little did I know it wasn't the first time—and his boss raked him over the coals in front of some of his co-workers. Barry was never one to hold back, and when push came to shove he threw a punch. That was the end of that job.

It was the turning point in our relationship. From then until the end, I don't think we had one day where we didn't scream or shout at each other. I hated myself for jumping into a marriage with a boy in a man's body; and he, I'm sure, resented the fact that I was the sole breadwinner. It probably didn't help that I rubbed his nose in it every chance I got.

Things only got worse when we had to leave the mobile home. It wasn't that Mr. Cromley evicted us; it was that we couldn't afford it on my pitiful income. No one wanted to hire Barry after word got around.

I had to beg my parents to let us stay in their mother-in-law suite until we got back on our feet. Barry hated being there. My parents' constant disapproval of him—of us—grated on him day after day. His inability to find work emasculated him.

Looking back, I'm sure if we had really wanted to, we could have worked through it and eventually made a life together. I knew some folks who had muscled through the bad times and figured it out. But I didn't want to. I hated what Barry had become. I was tired from working double shifts at the store, and I didn't have time for his adolescent antics.

The situation was getting worse every day, and our fights got louder and louder to the point where my father had to come downstairs once to break it up.

Everything that happened that summer and fall was your typical small town sob story. You've heard it a million times. We weren't the first young couple to have problems, and we wouldn't be the last.

Aunt Martha knew everything that had happened up to this point. Everyone in Middleton knew it, I'm sure. But what she didn't know, and what no one besides Barry and I knew, was what happened on our last night together.

\* \* \*

The memory is a splinter in my heart.

It was one night late in November. Middleton is closer to Flagstaff than Phoenix, so in winter we got a few days of snow here and there, but the flakes usually melted when they hit the ground. We rarely had to break out the shovel more than a few times a year.

That night, however, it wasn't just a light sprinkling: a blanket of white smothered the town. If I hadn't been so exhausted from fourteen hours straight at the Fast & Friendly, I might have appreciated the beauty. Instead, I was dreading the long walk home in the snow. I hadn't brought any boots, and I knew that by the time I got home, my sneakers would be soaked, and my feet would be frozen.

Barry had been in a foul mood all week, and I wasn't looking forward to

listening to another one of his drunken rants about how everyone in the town was trying to keep him down.

Besides, I had more serious things on my mind: like the fact that I was two weeks late, and I had no idea what I was going to do. First thing, though, was to find out for sure, but money was tight. I hated to shoplift a pregnancy test, but I told myself I would secretly put the money in the till come payday. No one would know the difference.

My fingernails were completely bitten off by the end of my shift.

When Alice Monterey arrived and stopped chewing her gum long enough to flash her pearlies at me, she said, “Evening, hun. You look like you’ve been through World War Three.”

“Uh, yeah, it’s been busy,” I said and forced a smile. “It’s like the snow sent everyone into a panic. They’re all stocking up on the essentials—we had a run on chips and beef jerky.”

“Gawd. That stuff will give you ulcers.” Alice was a health food nut. She called herself a vegan, but most folks in town didn’t know what that was, or if they did, they didn’t care.

“You all right for getting home? It’s nasty out there.”

I said, “I’ll manage.”

“Is Matt here?”

I jerked a thumb toward the back of the store. “Yeah. In his office.”

“Hey, Matt,” she bellowed.

Matt Childers was the assistant manager of the store. Tall and lean, he wore thick glasses that he couldn’t seem to keep perched on his angular nose. He stuck his head out of the office door, one eyebrow raised in question.

Matt was in his mid-thirties, with a wife and two kids. A decent boss, the only sign he ever gave that he was upset with something one of us girls screwed up was a pursing of his lips and a deep sigh.

“Yeah?”

“Can you watch the till?” asked Alice. “I’m going to drive Darcy home, all right.”

“Uh. Actually, I’m almost done here; I can give her a lift on the way.”

Alice winked and turned to me. “There you go, hun.”

I gave her a tentative smile. “Thanks.” Inside, my anxiety kicked into high gear, but I willed myself to calm down. I just had to be a little more careful.

I grabbed my jacket from my locker in the back room and buttoned up the front, my stolen package nestled against my stomach.

When I came out, Matt stood impatiently at the front door. He wore a puffy blue ski jacket I would have ordinarily thought looked ridiculous, but when he

opened the door to let me out, the wind bit through my light jacket and I was instantly jealous of his attire. I pulled my collar tighter around my neck and hunched over.

"It's cold," I complained.

"The car heats up quick," he said as he led the way to his station wagon and let me in. I was thankful to get out of the harsh wind.

"Got any plans tonight?" I asked by way of conversation. The least I could do to thank him for the drive was to be friendly.

"Veronica rented a horror movie. I forget the title. I'll probably fall asleep halfway through anyway." He let out a dry laugh. "Those movies bore me."

We turned the corner at my parents' street a little too sharply and slid into the other lane. Matt slammed on the brakes and, with one arm, reached out to stop me from falling over onto the gearshift. I panicked when his hand brushed against my stomach. But he didn't notice the extra bulge I had hidden beneath my jacket.

We hadn't been travelling that fast, and Matt was able to recover and get back on track before an oncoming minivan hit us. He'd noticed my reaction and looked worried.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to grab you like that."

"Just startled is all." I shot him a relieved smile.

He drove at a very slow rate the rest of the way.

"We're here," I said when we got close to my place. I could barely see out of the foggy windows of the car. The lights from the house were blurred and distorted.

He pulled up to the curb out front of my house.

"Thanks, Matt," I said. "I really appreciate this."

"Don't sweat it. Just remember boots and a winter jacket tomorrow, all right?" he told me in a 'dad' voice.

"You got it." I smiled and tried the door. It wouldn't open. I flushed, thinking I was on some kind of back luck streak.

"It's probably just stuck," Matt guessed. He leaned over me. "Here, let me try." Grabbing the handle, he pushed against it. I thought for sure his elbow would feel the package under my jacket.

I suggested, "Maybe if you try it from the outside."

"Just put your shoulder against it," Matt said. "I'll push at the same time."

It worked. The door creaked open with the snap of broken ice, and I quickly jumped out.

"Thanks again, Matt," I said. "It's cold out. Gonna run."

"Sure. See you tomorrow."

I slammed the car door and rushed to the side of the house where we had a separate entrance.

By the time I got inside, I was cold and miserable.

I wasn't expecting Barry to be standing there in front of me, and I wasn't expecting the look of rage in his eyes. "You bitch!" he accused.

"What?" Completely confused, I strained to figure out what he was angry about.

"You two-timing whore!"

I gasped and put my hand to my mouth. "What?"

"I saw you from the window with that ass, Matt Childers. What, he doesn't get enough at home, he's got to come sniffing around his employees? My wife?"

I made the connection. Barry must have been watching from the basement window, and the frost must have distorted the view from the house. To Barry's jealous eyes, it would have looked like Matt, when reaching over to open the door for me, was leaning over in an intimate embrace.

My eyes darted around the basement suite, looking for an escape. Several empty beer bottles decorated the coffee table, the television was tuned to the cartoon network, and an empty pizza box had fallen on the floor.

"Barry, I didn't—nothing happened!"

He grabbed me by the arms and shook me. "You lying sack of shit!"

That's when the package I'd shoplifted fell out from under my jacket.

The small box spilled out of the brown paper bag when it hit the floor, and it took Barry a few solid seconds to read the label and register the meaning. His paranoid brain leaped to the wrong conclusion.

"A pregnancy test?" he roared. "That bastard put a baby in you?"

"No, Barry, I swear! It's not like that!" My next words of protest went unspoken when he backhanded me across the face.

"I don't believe you!" He picked up the box and hurled it against the wall. "You lying, cheating little bitch! I'm not good enough for you? Is that it? You have to go and get yourself knocked up by that geek?"

On the floor, reeling from the pain in my jaw, I struggled to get to my hands and knees.

"Barry," I started to say, my voice hoarse and pleading.

"You shut your damned mouth," he screamed.

That's when he kicked me in the stomach.

I knew, at that moment, I hadn't needed the pregnancy test, because Barry had just killed the child growing inside me.

My baby.

That was the last thought I had before a red rage filled me, and the entire

world turned to flame.

## Chapter Fifteen

**I woke up** the next morning to the sound of humming and the smell of cooking bacon. My eyes were swollen from crying, and it took me a moment to focus and get my bearings. I had slept on the couch in the living room, and I must have used the armrest for a pillow; my neck was cramped. Someone had thrown a quilt blanket over me during the night.

I didn't remember falling asleep on my aunt. Unburdening myself to her must have released all the stress I had built up. For the first night in a long while, I slept through the night without any bad dreams.

Swinging my feet onto the floor, I stretched and felt my stomach growl. With the blanket wrapped around me like an oversized shawl, I padded into the kitchen.

Uncle Edward was at the table. He looked up from his plate of eggs, bacon and toast, and shot me a puzzled scowl.

"What, did you sleep *here* last night?" he asked.

"Edward, quit being an old crab," said Aunt Martha.

"Just a question," he shot back in a cantankerous tone, and sipped his coffee.

Aunt Martha filled a plate for me, and set it at the table. "You must be hungry."

My stomach growled again, and with a quick smile of thanks, I dug into the breakfast.

"Thanks for letting me crash, Aunt Martha." I gingerly bit into a sizzling strip of bacon.

"Oh pish-posh. Our home is your home."

"Do you know if the library is open today?"

There was one aspect of Aunt Martha's story that reverberated in my head. My great-grandmother Beatrice had the same affliction as I did. I had no idea whether there was a rational explanation for it, or if it was some kind of curse as Beatrice had believed. But what stuck in my mind most was that she had somehow controlled it.

I had never heard any stories of raging fires in our family history. Though I was beginning to think our family had a lot more secrets than most, I was sure

any kind of spectacular event such as mine would be talked about for years. Certainly, none of the newspaper reporters who flocked to our little town after my incident made any connection to past tragedies, and if there was dirt to be found, they were the ones to root around for it.

Aunt Martha leveled a disapproving gaze at me. "Yes, it's open this afternoon from one until three. But first, you need to get cleaned up for Mass."

"Church?" I balked.

Uncle Edward pointed a fork at me. "Yes, church. You'd best mind your Aunt. It'd be good for you to let folks in town see you're trying to blend back in."

It had been uncharitable of me not to give Aunt Martha more credit. She wasn't blood, but she was family, and she and my mother had been closer friends than most. That she had stepped up in the last few days to become like a surrogate mother to me meant more than I could express. My only concern, however, was what she thought of me now that she knew the truth. Did she think I was a freak of nature? Or that there was something more sinister at work here?

I had to start thinking about more than myself, as well. No telling what my presence here had done to my aunt and uncle's reputations. After I'd left for prison, business had suffered; I was certain that wasn't the only aspect of their lives which had changed for the worse.

Aunt Martha was looking at me expectantly.

I nodded and smiled. "Of course I would be happy to go."

"Besides," Uncle Edward said in a voice pitched low, "if I have to go, you have to go."

"What was that, Edward?" Aunt Martha asked.

"Uh, I think I heard a customer ring the service bell. I better check." He made himself scarce, leaving his empty plate and dishes on the table.

"I swear." Aunt Martha clucked her tongue in disapproval. "That man!"

\* \* \*

We never really talked about religion when I was growing up. Although my grandparents attended Mass every week, my parents had never been particularly religious, and we usually only went once or twice a year, at Christmas and Easter. By the time I was old enough to make the decision to go more often, or not at all, I suddenly found more interest in boys, clothes, cars and parties.

My father had always been more scientific-minded in his worldview. When I asked him about it once, he quite simply told me that religion had its place. As a long-time observer of nature, he said he believed there was more to the world than could be explained, but until someone proved their beliefs with hard data,



he would reserve judgment.

At twelve-years old, I had no idea what he was talking about and never asked him again.

Uncle Edward, I judged, went to church mostly to appease his parents and, later, his wife.

I couldn't tell if church was more a spiritual sanctuary or a social event for Aunt Martha. She wore a long burgundy dress with a white sash and white pumps. The sleeves came to her elbow, and she clasped both her hands together as if in prayer when we went inside. She wore a thick pearl necklace and—to my astonishment—wore makeup. In her left hand, she rolled her fingers over the beads of a rosary.

I wore a knee-length dark blue skirt and a plain white blouse at Aunt Martha's insistence. While I preferred my hair either loose or in a ponytail, she made me tie it up in a bun. I felt like I was six years old.

As we made our way through the entrance, Aunt Martha nodded, smiled and mouthed greetings to everyone we passed, while Uncle Edward continually adjusted the neck of his collar and grumbled. We found a pew, and I was about to sit down when Aunt Martha stopped me with a tap on my shoulder. With her eyes, she instructed me to follow her actions: she bent to one knee at the entrance of the pew and crossed herself before she continued down the length of the bench. Uncle Edward performed the same ritual, and I followed suit, and sat down in the spot closest to the aisle.

The priest introduced himself as Father Tomas. I didn't recognize him, but I knew the church occasionally transferred their ministers from parish to parish. He was a plump older man, balding with smiling eyes. The deep, resonant voice he used as he went through the rituals of Mass would have lulled me to sleep, if not for all the standing up and kneeling down every few minutes. I had no idea what I was doing, and just followed everything my aunt and uncle did.

After a while, though, my mind wandered back to what Aunt Martha had said about my great-grandmother, and how she had the same affliction as I did. I wished there was some way to find out more details. Beatrice was very religious; was there any truth to her conviction that this affliction stemmed from biblical times?

Part-way through the priest's homily, he suddenly had my full attention as his words and my thoughts fell together.

*“—The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his Kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace—*

*“What do you think Jesus meant by that? Are we to take that literally, that the*

unrepentant will actually burn in hell? Or is this a symbolic statement, that if someone does wrong, they will suffer internally from their own sense of guilt? Could guilt not also be a form of hell? Do we not punish ourselves relentlessly for our own trespasses?”

The priest rambled on about the nature of conscience, but my ears rang and my heart raced.

My great-grandmother Beatrice believed we were cursed because of something that had happened thousands of years ago. I had trouble coming to grips with that.

If a doctor or scientist had a test to prove it, I could almost believe we had some kind of mutation in our bloodline. But a curse passed down from generation to generation throughout history? Was that even possible?

A lot of people believed curses were real; maybe there was some truth to it. But if so, why our family? And why only some of us? Was it only the women?

The thought hit me like a fist: *I hadn't been able to protect my unborn baby, and it had died.* Was that the sin that triggered the ability? Had my great-grandmother also miscarried? Was that what my aunt had meant by the bond of blood being broken?

My breath caught in my throat.

Suddenly, I had to get out of there.

I stumbled over the knee rest in my desperation, and sprawled headlong into the middle of the aisle. The priest stopped in mid-word, and everyone stared at me—they all knew my terrible secret! Father Tomas only resumed his sermon when I got to my feet and hurried out of the church.

A torrent of emotions swirled through me. There had to be a meaning to all this. A cause. A logical explanation. Curses weren't real. Hellfire and brimstone weren't real. God didn't shower the wicked with lightning bolts. Or did He? There weren't such things as fallen angels. Or were there? If so, did they want to punish us for our sins?

But it wasn't my fault! There was nothing I could have done differently to save my baby and my parents!

By the time I got down to Main Street, I was shivering from the cold; I had left my jacket at church, and the wind had picked up.

I couldn't go back there, not after the show I had put on, and I wasn't ready to return home. There was no other place for me to go. I was sure Beth wouldn't appreciate me showing up unannounced. When I passed by a coffee shop, the windows were filled with gawking faces. It was as if every person who looked at me could see all the terrible things I had done.

I found my way to the park running along Canyon Creek, just off Main Street.

I sat down on the nearest bench and wrapped my arms around myself.

I stared at the hypnotic running water of the creek. A duck flew down and landed on the surface. It let the current carry it along a few moments, and then it shot its beak under the water, I assume for a lunch of minnows or a trout. It came up empty, and with a flap of its wings, took to the air once more.

I needed to think about this logically. Maybe there was a clue in the incidents themselves that would reveal the reason they occurred. It was difficult to remember everything that had happened that night with my parents because I had blacked out, but throughout my stay in jail I'd had two more flare-ups, and both were in the first few years. I remembered the initial incident quite clearly.

\* \* \*

The first night in the penitentiary had been the worst. I think that was the roughest moment of my life. When those prison doors swung closed and the electronic locks shut me in that cold cell, the reality of how low my life had fallen struck home. I didn't think I would make it through the night.

The misery was a thick paste in my mind. I had no friends, my parents were dead and everyone thought I had killed them. The child I'd had growing inside me was also dead because I had failed to protect it. What was left for me to live for?

I just wanted the world to stop; I wanted the pain in my heart to go away.

"Would you shut the hell up," someone growled at me. I hadn't even been aware there was someone else in the cell. Disoriented, I looked up through teary eyes at a woman standing over my bed. As with every other person I had seen lately, she glared at me, condemnation etched on her face like a mask.

So completely wrapped up in my own misery, I grabbed my pillow and held it like a life preserver. I tried to stop, but the tears had a mind of their own. I cried louder.

She shouted, "You just stop that right now, you little bitch, or I'll knock your teeth out."

"Leave me alone!" I yelled back at her, and sat up on one elbow. "You're all the same. You all hate me."

"Yeah, you're right, I hate you. You're the little psycho that killed her parents aren't you? Should've let yourself get burned up while you were at it."

"I didn't kill them!" I screamed, and lunged at her.

She swung her fist. It connected with my jaw and stars exploded in my head. I fell back to the bed, reeling, and the woman—I didn't even know her name—jumped on me and cocked her fist for another blow.

I had a sudden flashback of my last night with Barry.

The force inside, for the second time, took control of me. Before I knew it, the mattress was on fire. My cellmate jumped off with a cry of alarm.

“Fire! Help! The little psychopathic bitch tried to set me on fire!”

I *was* a psychopath. Instead of jumping off the bed, I threw myself in the flames and rolled around. I think for a short time, I was insane. I wanted to die. I wanted the fire to consume me as it had consumed my parents, my past and my future.

The fire grew higher, the flames licking the ceiling. My cellmate’s shouts for help turned to panicked screams.

I did not black out that night, as I had the first time the power took me. In the end the guards had to pull me from the flames, kicking and screaming, and the prison medic shot me up with some kind of hypodermic that put me out.

\* \* \*

The next day at the infirmary, when the doctor examined me, he was alarmed to see that my skin was completely unharmed by the fire.

“It’s a miracle you weren’t burned,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief.

What miracle? I survived. That wasn’t a miracle; that was a life sentence.

Maybe some higher power took pity on me: I was transferred to a different cell block where I met Kyra Michelson: drug dealer. At least, that’s how she introduced herself to me when the guard escorted me to my new cell.

Kyra was an extremely large woman with tattoos covering nearly every inch of her massive arms. I suspected there were many more under her ill-fitting prison jumpsuit. She wore black-rimmed glasses that were as thick as cola bottles, and I think she was the only woman I had ever seen under the age of fifty that was balding. The hair she did have was jet black and cropped short on the top and sides in a mullet.

Lying in the bottom bunk, she was propped up in the corner, and flipping through a fashion magazine. She looked up with a genuine smile when I stepped inside. The guard closed the door behind me without a word, leaving me to fend for myself. I felt like they had just thrown me to the wolves.

“I’d stand up,” Kyra said, “but I’m just too damned lazy. Hope you don’t mind the top bunk. It’s not that I’m afraid of heights, you know. I just don’t like taking chances. Come over here and sit down. What’s your name? I’m Kyra Michelson, drug dealer. What are you in for?”

Stunned, I could barely form a thought or a sound, and stood in the center of the room like a dunce.

“What? Are you shy or something? I don’t bite. I mean, I might if you ask nice. That was a joke, honey. Can you speak?”

“Hi,” I managed to say.

“Ah! There you go. That wasn’t so hard, now was it? Come in, make yourself comfortable. This is your new home, after all. I don’t deal drugs anymore, so don’t ask. I don’t even take drugs anymore, not since they put me in here. My boyfriend keeps offering to smuggle in a care package, if you know what I mean, but I’ve been clean for three years now. Seriously, you’re making me nervous. Sit down, honey.”

I was so taken aback by her non-stop chattering, I momentarily forgot about my initial fear; and when I realized this, I smiled and stepped forward to shake her hand.

Kyra smiled back, and from that point on we became fast friends.

She was on a first name basis with nearly every other inmate on the block, and as far as I could tell, she had no enemies. Through her, I met dozens of other girls, and learned the ins and outs of prison life. What to do, what not to do; how to scam extra helpings at the lunch counter; which guards would turn a blind eye to light contraband, which ones were tough bulls.

She had a story for everyone she met, and knew intimate details about their lives: whose kid was having a birthday, who was a shoe-in for parole; which girls were sneaking around with what guard; and what hobbies they liked to pursue in their free hours.

Whenever someone was having a rough go of it, Kyra was the one they came to for emotional support.

Though I was reluctant to socialize at first, Kyra dragged me with her wherever she went. She got me out of the janitorial duties I was originally assigned, and managed to convince the social counselor to give me a job as her administrative assistant, which was a cushy position. The only downside was that I had to attend every group session and take notes.

Every night before lights out—and sometimes well past—Kyra would talk continuously about her life before prison; her boyfriend, John; the daughter she had to give up for adoption; her life on drugs; and a hundred other topics. I didn’t mind. Listening to her go on was therapeutic, and helped to take my mind off my own troubles. Usually, the sound of her voice relaxed me to the point where I would fall asleep without hearing the end of her stories.

It was during one of her life narratives that Kyra mentioned the mantra of control that a rehabilitation coach had taught her when she was first trying to break her addiction.

In the six months I had been her cellmate, I never interrupted her when she

was in the middle of a story, but this time I prompted her to give me more detail. “A mantra? Did that work?”

“Well,” she said, thinking about it for a moment. “Sort of. There were a lot of other exercises he got me to do. I mean, there’s no magic cure for addiction. Like they say, you take it one day at a time. Once an addict, always an addict. You can only do as good as you can. But, yeah. There have been moments where the need grabbed me, and I couldn’t for the life of me think of a reason not to snort a line. Maybe it’s kind of like when they tell you to count from ten backward when you’re angry. It distracts you long enough for some part of your brain to take back control.”

I asked, “Can you teach it to me?”

Unusual for her, Kyra was silent for a long time. “Of course, honey. And I won’t even ask you why you would want to learn it.”

She was as good as her word, and she never asked me why. Though Kyra knew the most intimate details of practically everyone’s lives, she rarely got that information by sticking her nose in their business; people just felt comfortable enough around her to open up naturally.

Many nights I had lain awake, wondering about the blaze that took my parents’ lives and puzzling about the cause of the fire that consumed the bunks that first night in prison. Had I started it? The memories were clouded. Though I had been in both fires, I remained untouched—unscarred physically.

In a rare moment, about a month after moving in with Kyra, I had stolen a lighter from one of the other girls in the exercise yard and played the flame against the skin of my forearm. The pain was unimaginable, and the area where I applied the fire turned an ugly black color.

Tossing the lighter away from me and trying bravely to suppress the cry that welled in my throat—lest a guard or other inmate came to investigate—I clamped my hand around my forearm and bit back the tears.

When the agony lessened to a dull throbbing ache, I pulled my hand away. At first, I wondered how I would explain the burn to the nurse in the infirmary; but when I tentatively brushed my fingers against the blackened area, the dark patch flaked off. After a bit of rubbing, every trace of the burn was gone, and my skin was as clean and unmarred as it had ever been.

It was at that point I knew there was something unnatural about me. I knew, deep down, that somehow I was the one who had caused those fires.

It was because of Kyra that for the first few years inside I had never been pushed or angered to the point where I lost control—except for that first night. I wanted to believe that those flare-ups had been isolated incidents. Rationally, I knew better. Prison was a violent place. There was always the possibility of

confrontation, and that could lead to something very terrible—unless I could find a way to keep control.

Although it was never designed for someone like me, I learned the mantra from Kyra that night, and—except for one other incident—it had helped me through the remainder of my stay in prison.

\* \* \*

Behind me a horn honked and jarred me back to the present. I yelped and hopped off the bench. Down the street some kid had raced in front of a car on his bike, completely oblivious to the danger. The driver poked his head out the window and yelled something I couldn't hear.

As the boy sped off on his bike, he passed the Middleton Library.

The prison library had a computer with an internet connection, but I had never used it. The guards monitored usage, and there was no way I could do any kind of research about my affliction without alerting them.

But now there were no guards, no wardens, and no other inmates looking over my shoulder. I had a few clues; a starting-off point. I was not the only person in the universe to have suffered this burden. My great-grandmother had endured it until the end of her days, and had effectively hidden it from her family and friends.

Maybe there was a way I could look up my ancestry, and see if anyone else in my family had this ability. I had a million questions. How far back did it go? Why did Beatrice and I have it, and not my mother or grandmother? Was it just the women? Was miscarriage the trigger, the break in the bond of blood? Or was there more to it? Was it just my family? Did anyone else have this problem?

...Was there a way to control it?

My mind kept coming back to that one main point I had taken from my aunt's revelation of my family history: control. It was *possible* to control it. Up until now, I had only been able to suppress it.

There had to be a way for me to get a rein on this thing. It was time to stop letting it consume my life. I stood and crossed the street to the library. It was time to find some answers.

## Chapter Sixteen

**I never made** it into the library, though.

Avoiding the traffic on Main Street, I hurried across the road and stepped up on the sidewalk. When I got to the front door, I swore: I was fifteen minutes early. The doors were locked.

I peered through the glass to see if there was anyone moving around. The place was deserted.

Momentarily frustrated, and more than a little chilly, I looked around for someplace more hospitable to wait out the duration, when someone called out my name.

I turned and blushed when I saw Neil wave at me and call my name again.

“Darcy!” He grinned and headed toward me.

“Hi,” I said when he got closer. I was a brilliant conversationalist.

“Sorry if I startled you,” he said. With a glance at the closed sign on the library door, he asked, “Grabbing a book?”

My gut reaction was to be defensive, as if he were prying into my business; but then I realized he—like anyone else—was just being polite.

“No, uh...”

Neil raised his eyebrows, still smiling that disarming smile of his. Why did guys like him have to be so charming? With my past, I should never even look twice at another man; yet every time Neil was around my stomach got butterflies.

Also, he had never been anything other than a perfect gentleman. Despite my natural misgivings, I found myself letting my guard down.

“The motel doesn’t have the internet. I was going to do some online research.”

Neil perked up. “Yeah?”

I had to be careful what I revealed and how, but Neil was a firefighter after all. I was certain he was as good a person to help me as any. “About fire, actually.”

“Oh,” he said, his eyes lighting up. “My area of expertise.” He gestured down the street. “I was just headed to the fire hall to fill out some forms. Want to come with me? There’s a computer there you can use. Maybe if you tell me what you’re looking for, I can steer you in the right direction.”



When I hesitated, he lifted the large paper bag in his hand. There was a stamp on it from the deli down the street. He said, "I think I bought too much lunch. I can split my sandwich with you."

My stomach growled at the mention of food. "That sounds like a plan."

As we walked, I felt passersby staring at us. I kept glancing back at them, trying to meet their eyes, but whenever I did, I saw they were looking elsewhere.

"Something wrong?" Neil asked.

"Oh, uh, nothing."

\* \* \*

The fire hall was warm, and for that I was grateful. I stamped my feet and rubbed my hands to get the circulation going again.

Neil led me into the office. No one else seemed to be in the building.

"It's Sunday," he said. "We have the place to ourselves, unless someone calls in. Let me put the password into the computer for you."

After he fired up an internet browser, he gestured for me to take the chair. "All yours. You hungry?"

"Famished."

While Neil divided up his lunch, he glanced over at me. I hadn't typed anything into the address bar.

"Did you need help?" he asked.

"I know how to use the internet," I said.

"Sorry. I didn't know if they let you in—"

"Yeah, the prison library had computers, but they were monitored closely. I went on it a few times, but not for anything personal."

He passed me half a sandwich and opened a soda for me. "If you want, I can give you some privacy."

"No. I'm more hungry at the moment," I said, and smiled as I bit into the bread. We ate in silence for a moment.

"Maybe if you tell me what you're looking for specifically, I can suggest a starting point."

"How about spontaneous combustion?" I asked, and glanced at him out of the corner of my eye to measure his reaction.

"Interesting," he said. "We had a demonstration when I went through the academy on various chemical reactions. It's an important part of what we investigate. Compost heaps, manure, grain dust, even pistachio nuts can ignite in large quantities. It's a combination of fermentation and oxidization. Chief Hrzinski has a list around here somewhere. One of our duties is to go around to

the ranches and farms in the district and inspect their holding areas and barns for possible combustibles.”

“What about ... human combustion?” I asked, and held my breath.

“Yeah, sure,” he said in a casual tone. “It can happen. But it’s not the same as with chemicals. Human fat can ignite from the wick effect. There are a few cases where someone smoking a cigarette fell asleep and the hot cherry smoldered long enough to ignite him or her. It’s most common with those who are significantly overweight.”

I blinked. “The wick effect, huh?”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “Are you talking about the other night with Barry in the motel office? Like you said, he might have had an ember in the cuff of his shirt or something. Is that what you want to research?” Neil grew concerned. “I heard Sheriff Burke called you in to his office. Did you need someone to testify—?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I think we agreed not to press charges against each other.”

“That’s good.”

“But—” I started to say, trying to form the words in my mind, trying to decide how much to reveal and how close to the vest to play this. “Just out of curiosity ... what if there aren’t any external sources? I mean, what if there is no ‘wick effect’ to set a person on fire.”

Neil leveled a stare at me. I knew I sounded crazy, but I had to know. “What if it just ... happens?”

A long pause hung between us. When Neil spoke, his voice was even. “You mean telepyrosis: creating fire with the power of your mind.”

Another millennium passed between one beat of my heart and the next. I could feel the heat rise to my cheeks. There was no reaction on Neil’s face one way or the other. Did he think I was some kind of superstitious flake? Did he think I was reaching for an explanation of the other night’s events? Did he suspect the truth? How could he?

“Yes.” I held my breath.

“I guess it depends on who you talk to,” he said finally. “I mean, there haven’t been any scientific studies, if that’s what you want to hear. You won’t find anything on the internet about it other than what you read in fiction and comic books.”

I shot the computer a desperate look.

Neil’s next question was drawn out and careful: “Is that what you think happened with Barry? And with ... your parents?”

“What do you know about my parents?”

Neil looked a little uncomfortable, and he dropped his eyes. "I have a confession to make," he said. "I looked at the official report of what happened that night. To be honest, Chief Hrzinski practically shoved it in my hands my first day here. Said people would probably be talking about it forever, so I might as well have the facts straight."

I wasn't sure whether to be outraged, embarrassed, or devastated. With my lips tight, I asked, "And what were the facts?"

"Largely inconclusive," he said, keeping his face expressionless. "As far as I could tell from the report, your conviction wasn't based on official findings, but on your testimony at the trial. We never found any accelerants other than a whiskey bottle across the room. The point of origin was the carpet near the basement apartment door."

Neil watched my eyes while he finished his report. "It was snowing that night, and that area should have been wet since you'd just arrived home. Chief Hrzinski officially stated that he found no cause for the blaze and was at a loss for an explanation. An inspector came in from Phoenix, and he was completely stumped."

Neil wasn't cushioning his words. I gave him points for that. It didn't make hearing them any easier, and I was torn between screaming at him to shut his mouth, and running out of the office. I didn't want to play those events over in my mind again; it was too painful.

He said, "It's not that uncommon for a fire investigation to come up empty. The nature of the occurrence makes it difficult to come to any conclusions."

I stared at him, stunned, my mouth open and working, but my voice was lost to me.

Shrugging, he said, "I can show you the report if you like."

\* \* \*

No matter how many times I read those typed words, no revelations were forthcoming. The report was basically what Neil had said: inconclusive.

We were in the filing room in the basement of the fire hall. A lonely overhead light in a metal cover threw a pale yellow glow over us.

"This doesn't help me," I told Neil.

He shrugged. "What were you looking for? If there was an electrical problem in the wiring, or if a hot coal from a fireplace jumped onto the carpet, or any of a hundred other reasons were the cause, we would have found it. I know I'm being indelicate, but if the jury believed it was an accident, they would have let you off. Do you believe it was an accident?"

"It was an accident!" I said it louder than I had intended.

Neil put his hands up. "Hey, I'm just trying to help."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry about it," he said, smiling. "So ... you think it might be something paranormal?"

"I'm not crazy! I'm not!" I knew I sounded defensive, but it was a sore point.

"I never said you were," said Neil. "You were the one who brought it up. Obviously you were thinking it."

I peered at him and put my hands on my hips. "All right, so I have a question for you."

"Shoot." He nodded.

"Why aren't you dismissing this as the ravings of a madwoman? Anyone else would think I was off my rocker."

"Well, since we're baring our souls here," said Neil, "there have been some things I've seen in my life that were beyond explanation. Let's just say I don't disbelieve."

I blinked at him several times. "Really? You're not just playing? I promise you I won't appreciate the joke."

I stared into his eyes, searching for a hint that his words were anything less than genuine. As far as I could tell, he was being honest.

"I wouldn't tease you," he said. "Not for something like this. There might be a rational explanation for these kinds of powers, but until someone proves one way or another that these things can or can't exist, I'll reserve judgment."

I relaxed and dropped my hands to my sides. "You sound like my father."

"Must have been a great guy." Neil smiled.

"He was." I nodded as I remembered him. "I loved him. And I loved my mother. I didn't kill them. I would give anything to have them back. But—"

Neil gently prodded: "But?"

"It was an accident." I took a deep breath and faced him squarely. "But I think I *did* start that fire."

"With your mind?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "I don't have any other explanation."

He looked away for a moment, as if weighing the information. "All right. Let's say I believe you."

He didn't sound like he was mocking me, or stringing me along to make fun of me later. As a matter of fact, he sounded like he was seriously considering the possibility. I could barely breathe. First my aunt, and now Neil. It was surreal that I wasn't the only person in the universe who believed that this was possible.

"What do you think you have?" asked Neil.

Barely able to contain my excitement, I wondered if this was what it was like for a parishioner to confess to a priest and unburden their sins.

“I think I have this telepyrosis, as you called it. I don’t know if it’s a gift or—my great-grandmother thought it was a curse. A way of punishing us for some ancient sin. I’m not sure I believe that. But I do know that any time the power comes out, people get hurt or—”

I leaned against the filing cabinet. “I stayed up all night last night talking to my aunt. She told me that this ability was passed down in my family from one generation to the next, only sometimes it skips a generation. This ability is what came out that night with Barry at the motel, and last night at The Trough. It’s what happened the night my parents were killed, and it’s happened a few other times since.”

I didn’t realize that, during my speech, I had grabbed both his hands as if that act would reinforce my words and make him believe me. I so wanted him to believe me.

I looked into his eyes, searching for a hint of what he was thinking. The anticipation was unbearable.

To me, it seemed as if he were coming to some kind of conclusion, but was hesitant to lock it down.

“Can you...?” he started to say, then ran out of words. I saw him struggle. Finally, he asked, “Can you make it happen whenever you want?”

My elation faded. “No. That’s the problem. I can’t control it at all. It controls me.”

Neil made the connection. “Those words you spoke at the bar.”

“My mantra. It’s supposed to calm me down, distract me or something. A friend of mine taught that to me.”

“And does it work?”

“Most of the time. But lately, it’s been getting more difficult to stop it from happening. This power overcomes me when I’m extremely angry, or if I feel my life is in danger. And it just, I don’t know, replaces me. I literally see red.” Then I laughed. “You probably think I’m nuts. I tell you I have a superhuman power, but I can’t prove it. I’d think I was nuts. I almost can’t believe that you believe me.”

“Well...” he began. “Other than making you angry to find out the truth, I guess I just have to trust my instincts. As I said before, I’ve seen some fairly inexplicable things in my time.”

“Really?”

Neil seemed to become uncomfortable with the question, and gestured at the report I had dropped on the top of the filing cabinet. “So, was that what you

wanted to research? Were you hoping to find something in there that would tell you where this is coming from?”

“Yeah, and maybe a way to control it. My aunt said my great-grandmother had this ability—or curse, or whatever you want to call it; but she was somehow able to control it and hide it from everyone.”

“How did your aunt know, then?”

“Apparently, my great-grandmother Beatrice kept a secret journal.”

“A journal?” Neil asked, and something in the way he asked piqued my interest.

“Yeah.”

He snatched up the report and flipped through a few of the pages. Finally, he found what he was looking for, and turned the folder around for me to see. When I shook my head, he pointed.

At the bottom of the report, Chief Hrzinski had written:

*As instructed, will keep personal effects in lockup until case is inactive.*

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“It means there’s a possibility what you’re looking for is right here in this building—in the lockup.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew a key ring.

“Let’s go see if anything is still there.”

## Chapter Seventeen

**The fire hall** had a caged storage room where they kept evidence gathered from various investigations. Neil explained that the police were usually required to keep evidence as long as a case was open, and in arson-related investigations the fire department had a similar policy. Although I was out on parole, my case was technically still active until I'd fully served my sentence.

Neil unlocked the cage and we both went inside the storage area and started our search.

"Here it is," he said when he found a carton with my name on it.

We ripped it open and I saw the journal for the first time. It was bound with a leather cover and a small lock—the strap was busted off. A pattern of flowers was etched on the face in gold relief, and stamped in the center was the word 'Journal' in fancy lettering. My excitement got the better of me, and I plucked it out of the box and started to flip through the pages. My heart beat fast and my breathing came in such a rush, I could barely get out my words.

"This is fantastic! I can't believe it didn't burn up."

I started to walk out of the room with the journal, but Neil stopped me. "Darcy, I'm sorry. That's still official evidence. We can't remove it from this room."

"Oh." My disappointment was crushing. "Well, can I read it here?"

"Sure, but you'll have to have someone with you when you do. It's the rules. But I have to get back upstairs, soon. Sorry," he repeated.

"You don't have to be sorry. It's no problem. Listen, I have to get home now anyway. My aunt's going to be furious with me for making a scene at church this morning. Can I come back later?"

Neil checked his watch. "Yeah. I've still got that paperwork to do. It's going to take me a couple hours. Maybe we could grab some dinner? We could come back here afterwards."

I looked at him to see if I could tell from his body language if he was asking for a date, but he waited for my answer with that calm smile of his. "Dinner?" I echoed. "Sounds great. Here, let me put this back and we can get out of here."

When Neil turned around and headed for the door, I mimed putting the journal

back in the carton. Then, using my body to block his line of sight, I slipped the journal under my arm inside of Neil's jacket, which I still wore. I wasn't proud of it, but I couldn't wait to read the journal. I had to know what my great-grandmother wrote.

We exited the basement and, before I left the fire hall, I said, "Thank you again, Neil. It means more to me than you can guess. I'm glad you listened and glad you didn't automatically think I was a lunatic."

"Not at all. I'll see you at the motel later?"

"Yes." On impulse, I leaned in and gave him a peck on the cheek. Before either of us could succumb to any additional awkwardness, I asked, "Can I keep the jacket for the walk home?"

"Yeah, no problem."

I left him there, both of us smiling.

\* \* \*

I couldn't walk back home fast enough. Aunt Martha was going to be livid with me, and I quickened my pace.

When I got two blocks down, an odd thought occurred to me. I was so preoccupied with the discovery of the journal, and with Neil asking me to dinner, that I hadn't wondered at how easily he had believed my story. I'm sure if someone told me what I told him, I would think they were off their rocker.

Perhaps I subconsciously wanted Neil to believe me so badly that when he did, it felt natural. Now two people in the world shared my secret with me. That I didn't have to bear this burden entirely alone gave me something I didn't have yesterday after the incident with Barry at The Trough: it gave me a sense of belonging, a sense that there might still be a place for me in the world.

I made a note to follow up on that thought later at dinner. As I got near the motel, my thoughts turned to more pressing issues: What had my great-grandmother written in her journal? There were a few things missing from the puzzle of my power: the why of it, and the how of it. I hoped the journal might shed some light on the mystery.

I had never met Great-Grandmother Beatrice. My mother had a few photographs hung in frames on the stair wall, old dusty sepia renditions of a sour-faced matron.

Like a repentant puppy that ran away from home and finally returned, I entered my aunt's house later that afternoon. I knew there would be hell to pay for running out of church and embarrassing her in front of the other parishioners.

I braced myself for the impending storm, but to my surprise, no one was there.



After poking my head into the bedroom and the cellar stairwell to be certain, I made my way to the kitchen for something to drink.

I dropped the journal on the kitchen table and raided the refrigerator for a glass of orange juice. I drank it down in a rush, and then poured another. This time I sipped at it while I sat at the table and flipped the journal open to the first page.

The first third of the journal contained entries from my great-grandmother's teenage years. Like most young girls, Beatrice talked of clothing, of community socials, and everyday gossips. She wrote how Nancy Trillian spilled ink over her dress on purpose one day, and that she would get her back if it was the last thing she ever did.

Beatrice excelled in school, and often wrote about her thoughts on God and religion, and how she wanted to become a nun. Her parents forbade it, however. They thought she would be better off married.

Being mostly self-sufficient on their ranch near Sedona, the family had come through the Great Depression without feeling the worst of its effects, but they were by no means wealthy, and could not afford to keep Beatrice indefinitely.

When she turned sixteen, her parents began to introduce her to eligible bachelors from surrounding towns.

One such gentleman caller was a rancher nearly twenty years her senior—Walter Gordon from outside Middleton. He had been widowed a year earlier and had four sons. When he heard Beatrice was of marriageable age, he came calling, looking for someone to keep his home and raise his boys—the oldest of whom was only two years younger than his would-be bride.

Beatrice hated the thought of marriage, but she had no other choice.

While I told myself I would re-read those passages later to get a better sense of my family's history through her words, I skimmed over them until I found the first reference to the fire.

While the beginning passages were written in a very fine, controlled hand, the entry the morning after her wedding night was written in an angry scrawl, the letters jagged and rushed, the pages torn in places where the pen pushed through.

\* \* \*

*March 14*

*How can I bear the shame? How can I ever face my priest to confess this sin? It must be a sin, what that evil man forced upon me. The pain was unbearable, and continues today. Is this what all women must endure? Is this our penance for the wickedness of Eve? Is this what they call Original Sin?*

*I cannot look upon my face in the mirror. My skin is on fire, as if I am taken by fever.*

*If I am to die because of this evil occurrence, so be it.*

*Though I may be destined for hell for thinking so, I also wish Mr. Gordon to die.*

\* \* \*

The next entry was dated under two months later:

\* \* \*

*May 5*

*I wish I had died that evil night. I have not been myself since, and have barracked myself in my room. I swear upon all that is holy I will never let that man near me again. But I fear his evil has infected me. I have not been able keep my morning meal down these past three days. I feel I am wasting away. Perhaps I am dying of consumption, like Saint Thérèse of Lisieux.*

*Mr. Gordon continues to attempt entry to my bed chamber, but I have barricaded my door with a very heavy dresser I had to move by pushing it with my legs. I will never let him in this room so long as I have breath in my body.*

\* \* \*

*May 12*

*Doctor Smith left me today with joyous news. I am not dying. I am with child. He tells me my reactions are normal, and not to worry. His prescription is a tonic of vitamins, as much as I care to eat, and plenty of fluids. Mr. Gordon was furious when Doctor Smith ordered that I was to remain untouched for the duration of my time, and that the boys were to serve me. I am not to lift anything heavier than a pail of water.*

*I will have a baby of my own.*

*God loves me.*

\* \* \*

*August 28*

*Something is wrong. My belly is swollen so tight, and it hurts much more than it should. The ache in my back has increased to the point I can barely rise from bed.*

*My mother has arrived to attend me. She and Mr. Gordon often have words in*

*the hall with the door closed to protect my young ears, and I cannot tell what they are saying, but my mother always comes back into the room flushed and angry.*

*\* \* \**

*September 1*

*Doctor Smith visited. He has told me the bad news: there is a complication with the pregnancy. He is concerned for my health and my ability to take my child to term. He has ordered complete bed rest and promises to visit on a weekly basis.*

*Mr. Gordon often curses at me and Mother.*

*\* \* \**

*September 19*

*The pain! I cannot—*

*\* \* \**

*There was only more entry in the journal that year, and it was the longest account my great-grandmother had written so far. With hungry eyes, I devoured the words. As I read, I could feel everything she went through as if I were there in her place.*

*\* \* \**

*December 24*

*She is my angel, my salvation. I named her Edna, after my mother. She is also the only other survivor of the night of flame over a month ago.*

*My labors had come earlier than Doctor Smith predicted, and I only had my mother there to aid me in my time of distress. As the good doctor feared, something happened inside me. I cannot explain it. I can barely remember the events that took place, and I have no account of that night except for angry words from Mr. Gordon.*

*The first birthing pain took me late in the afternoon while I was making water. My mother reacted when the water turned crimson and I shrieked in agony.*

*Immediately, she called for help, and Mr. Gordon and his eldest, Timothy, raced in from the fields to aid us. They were worse than useless, and my mother yelled at them to fetch Doctor Smith.*

*I know I lost my wits several times over the course of the next few hours. I*

*prayed to God, I swore at Him. I yelled out unholy words that I had only overheard men say when they thought women were not present.*

*Consciousness left me more than once, but when the worst pain hit me, I was fully awake, though I think at that moment I was unaware of anything other than the ripping through my center as my daughter struggled to escape my womb.*

*Exhausted, I wanted nothing more than to succumb to the torture and retreat from the suffering. I vaguely remember my mother screaming at me to stay awake, that my trials were far from over.*

*I know I was not myself. There was a wrenching sensation deep inside me, and I knew, at that moment, something had gone terribly wrong. I screamed like a tormented soul, and I felt as if I carried death within me.*

*Mr. Gordon swore that if the child died, he would have no further use for me, and would be happy to let me follow the child to hell. My mother yelled back at him and made as if to scratch his eyes out. I saw him swing his fist at her. She fell to the floor, her head bent at an unnatural angle.*

*The world became flame and I felt the deepest rage, as if I were possessed by a demon from hell. I was the Devil himself that night, and Timothy and Doctor Smith arrived only minutes after my sinner's body unleashed the greatest sin imaginable. The rest of the night remains lost to my memory.*

*When I confronted Timothy, who had inherited his father's ranch, he told me in a hushed voice that there was nothing left of his father and my mother except for outlines of ash on the floor. No one knew I was a murderess, and how could they suspect a woman in the midst of childbirth? Even so, no one could explain what had happened.*

*Timothy has allowed me to stay at the ranch. The child is his sister, after all.*

*If not for my daughter, though, I know I would commit another mortal sin. But I must be strong for her. I must protect her from the world. If it is in my power, I will shelter her forever from the evils that men do to women.*

*I miss my mother.*

*If you can hear me in heaven, Mother, I am truly sorry for what I did. I will most likely suffer an eternity in the flames of hell for killing Mr. Gordon.*

*Please forgive me.*

*\* \* \**

*At the end of that passage, I had to take a deep breath and compose myself. This was a history of my family that had been kept from me. I wondered why my own mother never talked to me about her grandmother's tribulations.*

*Focusing back on the journal, I saw that there was only one more entry, dated*

nearly fifteen years after the last.

\* \* \*

*January 15*

*To my daughter:*

*Should you ever chance to read this journal, let me tell you I have no idea if the trials of evil will ever beset you as they have me. God has cursed our bloodline. I have studied the scriptures and I know what it is.*

*As Genesis tells us: ‘...the sons of God, looking at the women, saw how beautiful they were and married as many of them as they chose...’*

*The offspring of humans and angels led to the corruption of mankind. God saw this and created the Great Flood to wipe us from the Earth. In His mercy, he spared a few, and banished the offending angels from His realm.*

*I believe these fallen angels blame us for their fall, and seek to punish those of us who break the bond of blood. My mother is dead because I tormented Mr. Gordon. Now, a simple trespass will cause me to unleash angel’s fire on those close to me.*

*I keep myself apart from others, and I keep myself distant from you for your own protection.*

*I have found a way to suppress the rage of the fallen angels. After years of desperation, I think I have stumbled upon a means, and I bow before God every night in the hope that you do not require this lesson.*

*Alone one day last week, while I thought to run from you, lest my power take you as it took my mother, I bade the fire to consume me and end my suffering.*

*I embraced the flame.*

*...And I did not end.*

*That, I believe, is the salvation. When you finally give yourself over to God completely, body and soul; that is when he forgives you. To save yourself and save others, take God into your heart.*

\* \* \*

There were no more entries in the journal. I closed it with more force than I intended, and the pages slapped together with a sharp sound.

Give yourself to God? What did that mean?

I didn’t have time to unravel the puzzle because Aunt Martha opened the front door and called out, “Darcy, are you here, my dear?”

The cordiality in her voice sounded forced. I barely had time to hide the book under a stack of newspapers before three people entered into the kitchen.



## Chapter Eighteen

**Aunt Martha entered** the kitchen first, Uncle Edward a step behind.

Like a child who got caught with her hand in the cookie jar, I flashed them a guilty smile.

I was about to return the greeting when I saw who accompanied them. Sheriff Burke, dressed in his badly fitting uniform, zeroed in on me like a predator scenting blood. My stomach tightened. It was that automatic reaction to authority ingrained in me since my first night in prison. I fought my instinct to cower, and stood to meet him.

“Sheriff—”

“Darcy. I thought it would take longer for you to slip up. I can’t tell you how pleased I am to do this. For violations of your parole conditions, I am placing you under arrest—”

“Martin, damn you!” Uncle Edward growled. His face turned a deep crimson and he put himself between Sheriff Burke and me. “You didn’t come here to get her to sign more paperwork, you lying little bastard.”

“You watch your mouth, Eddie. I’m here on official business and if you interfere, I’ll be well within my rights to arrest you too!”

“Try it!” was Uncle Edward’s immediate reply, and he clenched his fists and planted his feet.

Aunt Martha’s was the only voice of reason. “Gentlemen, please. Not on the Sabbath.”

“I don’t care what day it is,” Sheriff Burke shot back. “Your niece broke parole. I have eyewitnesses that say she was in The Trough last night.”

I stepped around Uncle Edward. “I only drank water! I was just there for the dancing.”

“And to start a bar fight!” the sheriff replied.

I could feel my face burning with anger. “I did no such thing. If you want the truth—”

Sheriff Burke snorted. “Ha. You wouldn’t know the truth if it came up and bit you in the ass.”

Aunt Martha put her hands on her ample hips. “I’ll have none of that language

in this house!”

As if only just realizing he was outnumbered three to one, Sheriff Burke took a step back and lowered his voice. “Are you going to cooperate, or do you want me to charge you with resisting arrest as well?”

“Now you just wait a minute,” Uncle Edward said, straining to keep his tongue civil. “She told you she didn’t consume any alcohol. Who said she did?”

“Well, no one,” the sheriff admitted. “But everyone I talked to placed her there and said she instigated a fight between my son and that new fireman. And you can bet I’ll see to it he never makes chief in this town.”

Uncle Edward growled low in his throat. “What is this really about, Martin? Are you really serving the law, or are you just mad that you have to fight your son’s battles for him.”

I hadn’t seen Sheriff Burke’s face go that color since the night Barry and I wrapped his police car around a tree. I knew he was going to blow.

Throwing my hands up, I said, “It’s all right. If he wants me to go with him, I won’t resist. Send me back to jail, if you want. But since our truce is over, I would like to press full charges against Barry for assaulting me last week, and for assaulting me last night.” I pushed my hair back from my face to show him my swollen cheek.

I gave him a humorless smile. “Your own words, Sherriff: *everyone goes down together*. I can prove I didn’t have anything to drink besides water. Can Barry prove he didn’t throw the first punch?”

Sheriff Burke was so outraged that he vibrated, but he had clearly run out of arguments.

Uncle Edward broke the silence. “Now, Martin, get the hell off my property. The next time you come around here, you had better have a legal warrant or, badge or not, I’ll finish what I started thirty years ago.”

Sheriff Burke outweighed my uncle by fifty pounds, had police training in combat techniques, and had a gun and baton.

Even with all that, he still turned on his heel and quick-marched out of my aunt’s house, his face as red as an apple.

The moment he left, I sank to the kitchen table and held my head in my hands. “When will this ever end?”

In the back of my mind, I registered that this was the second time I’d had a confrontation with Sheriff Burke, and the power had not shown its unholy presence. Maybe some part of me didn’t think of him as a serious threat. He was all bluster and pose: a man harsh of word and empty of action.

I should have taken him more seriously.



\* \* \*

My aunt put her hand on my shoulder, a consoling gesture which I appreciated, but Uncle Edward's voice cut through my anger.

"Are you a complete idiot?"

Eyes wide, I stared up at him, unable to protest.

He continued: "How dare you go out drinking when you're on parole? Do you have no consideration or respect for us? We took you in, gave you work and a roof, and this is how you repay us?"

"Edward," Aunt Martha cautioned, but her husband flipped his hand at her.

"No. This is too much. I won't have it." With a sigh, he turned around and walked out of the kitchen. "I wash my hands of it all."

"Edward," Aunt Martha called out to him, pleading.

I grabbed her arm to stop her from going after him. "No. Let me make this right."

With a nod, Aunt Martha made herself busy by gathering dinner fixings from the pantry.

\* \* \*

By the time I caught up with Uncle Edward, he was already halfway up the hill behind the motel. I had no idea where he was going, but he was making time as if he were a soldier on the march.

When I reached him, I was out of breath and couldn't say anything. He glanced at me, but did not slow his pace. Maybe he just needed to walk off his anger, but I needed to make peace with him.

For the past few days, I felt we were getting closer, that I was tearing down the wall of distrust between us. He was right. It was foolish of me to take that kind of chance last night. I'd betrayed whatever trust I'd gained with him. When I finally regained my wind and matched his stride, I told him as much.

"It was stupid. I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

Another glance out the side of his eye and a grunt was the only acknowledgement he gave.

I knew I could apologize until I was blue in the face. Uncle Edward was a mule when he wanted to be. I had to come at it from a different angle.

"I'm sorry I put you between Sheriff Burke and me. He's looking for any excuse to get rid of me. He's hated me ever since I took up with Barry. But I can fight my own battles, you know."

"Ha," he scoffed.

Suddenly indignant, I thrust my hands on my hips. "I can!"

"No," he explained. "I know you can fend for yourself. But if you must know the truth, he's hated not just you, but all our family since before you were born."

"Why?"

At first I thought he wouldn't answer me, and wondered whether I should press him on the matter. Without warning, he adjusted his course and headed for a large fallen tree. I followed, and when we reached it, he sat down and rested his hands on his knees.

Reverently, I sat beside him. I could see he was trying to gather his thoughts. I didn't need to urge him on; I just needed to give him enough room to feel comfortable. In silence, I watched a pair of swallows alight on a tree in the distance.

"I won't apologize for it," said Uncle Edward. "The way I see it, it was providence that brought your aunt and I together."

I had no idea where he was going with this story, but the last thing I wanted to do was interrupt him. I kept my mouth shut.

He continued his story. "When Martha's family moved to town, oh, I would have been about twenty ... twenty-one or something. Her folks hired me to help settle them in, make some adjustments and repairs to their house. Run some errands. I was working full-time for my father, but every moment I could spare I was over there.

"She was a looker, your Aunt Martha—still is as far as I'm concerned. Turned more than one head back then, I can tell you. With her being new to town, well, that just added to the mystery of it all.

"I counted my lucky stars that her folks had enlisted my help. She liked me, or so I thought. She found any excuse to get in my way, to spill my wash water when her father got me to scrub the porch, to misplace my tool box when I was tasked to repair the fence."

Uncle Edward glanced up at me.

"You know I've never been much for sharing feelings. It wasn't that I was shy. Maybe I just needed more time to gather my courage. I waited too long to court her. She got tired of waiting and when Martin Burke came sniffing around, she agreed to let him take her to a movie and dinner.

"I was mad. Anger and youth is a bad combination. I followed them. I don't know what I meant to do, but I wasn't thinking straight. My heart was broken and I was hurt."

Uncle Edward fell into a quiet contemplation for so long, I thought the story was over and I had somehow missed the ending. Before I could prompt him to continue, he did so of his own accord.

“The Burke family has been trouble from day one. Martin’s father was a bully, Martin’s son is a bully, and Martin himself is the poster boy for bullies.

“He figured he was due some payment for shelling out his hard-earned cash, and he thought Martha owed him a favor.

“I knew something was up when they turned off the road down near old man Sawley’s pasture. Most nights, that stretch is deserted—except for that night, because I wasn’t in my right mind and, like some love sick puppy, I was following them.

“I saw what he wanted. And Martha was not going to give it to him.

“Men like Martin and Barry don’t understand what the word ‘no’ means. He got rough with her. I was close enough to see, and I ... I got there in time.

“I pulled him out of that car and beat him senseless. In some countries, they castrate people like Martin Burke. I always carried a buck knife with me, and that’s what I intended to do to him.

“Your aunt is the very soul of forgiveness, and she stopped me. I promised him if he ever crossed me or Martha again, that would be the end of him.”

When Uncle Edward finished his long story, I couldn’t think of anything to say to him. But my thoughts were awirl.

It all fell into place for me then, why my parents were so furious with me for marrying into the very family that had caused so much pain and turmoil thirty years ago.

Looking back, I realized how much of an idiot I had been as a teenager.

And now Martin Burke was Sheriff Burke. I was both angry and embarrassed at the same time. How could someone who had such little regard for the law seek a career in law enforcement? I guess some people got off on that kind of power. Suddenly it made sense that Barry’s father, a bully by nature like his son, would be drawn to that line of work.

In conclusion, Uncle Edward said, “It took a lot of *control* for me to keep from killing him that night.” Then he looked at me fiercely, as if the words bore a particular significance.

Sometimes I can be pretty slow on the uptake, and there had been more drama over the past week than I had experienced in the previous ten years. My mind was flooded with conflicting thoughts, questions, emotions and indecision. Somehow, though, I cut through all that and replayed Uncle Edward’s last words through my mind.

*Control?*

My eyes widened. Did he suspect the truth?

Uncle Edward said, “I’m not a fool, though everyone treats me like one. Sometimes you can learn more by keeping your mouth shut and your ears open.”

“Uncle Edward...?”

Dropping his voice, he said, “I heard folks talking down at the barber shop yesterday when I went in for a trim. I heard the accusations about Barry when he came to the motel. I overheard you and Martha talking last night about bursting glasses and chairs too hot to sit in. I also recognized that journal you tried to hide in the kitchen when we came home just now.

“But that’s not everything I know.”

I could barely believe my ears. Did everyone know my secret? Was this why Uncle Edward was opening up to me now; he knew it was not me who killed his sister—my parents? Did he know it was an accident? That the power controlled me? Did he believe me now?

“Come with me,” he said, standing and setting a brisk pace over the hill he had been walking toward originally. I followed, and when we reached the crest, he pointed to Circle Lake, the small body of water in the distance where I had played as a child.

“One day, when I was very young, I saw my grandmother come over this rise by herself. Your great-grandmother. I trailed her at a distance, curious, as young boys can be.

“I wanted to block what I saw that day from my memory. I didn’t want to believe it. It was a mirage. A fancy of a child’s imagination.”

It was obvious what he wanted to say was of great importance. His jaw was set and his eyes stared out over the lake as if remembering.

“What did you see?” I asked. At first I had no idea what he was talking about, but as my thoughts raced back to Beatrice’s last journal entry, my mind made the connection.

Uncle Edward spoke in a hushed whisper. “I saw my grandmother set the lake on fire.”

*Fire?*

Beatrice’s last journal entry was years before Uncle Edward had been born. He had witnessed her use the power again years later. It occurred to me that she had used the power more often than I had assumed. She had somehow mastered the fire. How? *‘I embraced the flame,’* Beatrice had written.

I stared at Uncle Edward, searching his face for more clues. All I saw was the fear in his eyes as he remembered.

“The steam rose like a thundercloud,” he said and shook his head, as if he could still not believe what he saw after all these years.

He continued, “I ran home before she saw me. I have never been more frightened in all my life. For years, I pretended it was all in my imagination. When you—when my sister died in that fire...”

Uncle Edward said no more, and turned on his heel and left me at my crossroads, to decide for myself which direction to take.

## Chapter Nineteen

### Control.

Wherever I turned, that word took center stage in my every action and thought. It was all about control. Some people thought control was nothing more than an illusion, a comfortable blanket in which to wrap oneself and pretend the world was not an unpiloted freight train hell bent for disaster.

Control could be had, but it came at a very steep price.

I knew, deep in my heart, if I did not grab the reins of this horror inside me, it would control me instead.

When Uncle Edward turned back in the direction of the motel, I headed the opposite way.

To the lake.

*She set the lake on fire*, Uncle Edward had said.

How?

*I embraced the flame*, great-grandmother Beatrice had written in her journal.

To gain control, she had to give herself over to it.

Was that the secret to controlling this thing? Did you first have to surrender to it?

It was time for me to make a stand; just I had with Barry and his father.

I walked purposefully toward the bank of Circle Lake. There was no one around as far as I could see. When I arrived at the edge of the water, I held my arms out as if in surrender. I willed the flame to come out, and if I lit up like a candle, at least I could throw myself in the water.

But nothing happened.

I cursed and then tried a new tactic.

I focused all my thoughts on the water and I imagined it boiling. I imagined it was gasoline and I was the tinder, and I visualized the explosion.

A bird chirped in the distance. Wind whistled through the long grass.

With a sigh, I sat down on the rocky beach, picked up a stone and tossed it into the water. It landed with a splash, but the lake did not give me any indication of what was wrong.

Why wouldn't the fire come when summoned?

A thought came to me. The only time I was consumed by the power of the flame was when I was very angry or very frightened. At the moment, I was neither. A little frustrated perhaps, but otherwise calm.

A dragonfly hovered nearby, as if curious about my business.

Perhaps it was a state of mind? I was reluctant to do so, but I tried to recall the night Barry had beat me, and concentrated on how frightened, scared and hurt I was.

My heart beat faster, I grew angry, but my efforts were in vain; I could not summon the flame. Perhaps there had to be an element of danger as well, a tangible threat?

But then, according to her journal, Beatrice had been able to set the lake on fire at will. How?

That was one piece of information I wished she had included.

In a final gesture of frustration, I threw a rock in the lake and, hanging my head in defeat, I gave up and headed back home.

\* \* \*

I half hoped Uncle Edward would be there, and maybe shed some light on my failure. After circling the motel twice with no sign of him either outside or in any of the rooms or office, I made for the house. He wasn't there either, but I heard my aunt laughing. She wasn't alone.

When I tentatively poked my head into the kitchen, I was shocked to see Neil at the table.

They both looked up as I entered, smiles on their faces.

"Neil?" I said.

"You didn't forget our date?"

I had. "Of course not," I stammered. "But you're a little early, aren't you?"

We all glanced at the clock hanging over the door arch. It was nearly six o'clock. Where had the day gone?

"Oh, sorry about that," I said. "Did you make reservations somewhere? Are we too late? I can't go like this. I have to get ready."

"No problem. Your aunt has offered to cook dinner. It's been more years than I can count since I had anything that wasn't out of the microwave."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," I said to my aunt, mildly embarrassed. There were so many questions I had for each of them, I wasn't sure I could quell them long enough to make polite conversation through a whole meal. Each of the three knew my secret, but the last thing I wanted was everyone to talk about it together. I needed to work through how I was feeling about having this

affliction; but I wasn't ready to put myself up as the topic of discussion.

"Pish-posh," Aunt Martha said with a cluck of her tongue. "I already had everything prepared for three; what's one more? Besides, we all want to get to know your new man better."

I flushed a deep crimson. *New man?* "Aunt Martha!"

She winked at Neil, who managed to smile through his own beet red complexion.

"We're just friends," I said, and my gut clenched when I thought of Uncle Edward; he wasn't known to hold back an opinion, right or wrong, and if for whatever reason he and Neil didn't hit it off, things could get uncomfortable. I needed time to figure out exactly what my relationship was with Uncle Edward, and with Neil, and I wasn't looking forward to adding any complications to that.

"For now," Aunt Martha added teasingly. And both Neil and I tried to find something interesting in the direction of our shoes.

\* \* \*

Aunt Martha sent me off to make myself decent (she actually said it that way) and enlisted Neil to help with the last minute details of the meal. I was too excited to stay embarrassed, and broke records showering and getting into a change of clothes.

Dinner was roast with potatoes, carrots and all the extras. I could smell it from my motel room door once I stepped out, and my stomach gurgled in anticipation.

When I arrived, the table was filled to overflowing with the main course as well as buns and butter, glass bowls of green tomato chow, Dijon mustard for the roast, and—to my astonishment—a bottle of red wine. I raised my eyebrows at that, but Aunt Martha said, "I won't tell if you don't. What we do in the privacy of our own home is our business. Martin Burke can blow it out his hindquarters."

Uncle Edward showed up just in time to dig in, and aside from shaking Neil's hand when I introduced the two, the only words he spoke were to complain about the Cardinals failing to hold on to their fourth quarter lead again. It seemed he had spent the afternoon down at The Trough watching the last of the game and shooting some billiards.

He never met my eye once.

The entire event went much better than I had expected, and I was starting to feel somewhat normal.

When dinner ended, Neil got up and helped with the dishes without being asked, and that gave him quite a few brownie points with Aunt Martha.

Uncle Edward, in his usual gruff way, excused himself from the dinner table.



“Gotta go make the rounds, make sure everything’s locked up.”

Feeling like a fifth wheel, I stood and offered to help him, but he waved me back down. “No, don’t bother yourself. I’ll most likely have a long list for you tomorrow anyway.”

With that, he was gone, and I was left trying to help Aunt Martha and Neil until they both shooed me away.

Idly, I wondered what had become of my great-grandmother’s journal, and wandered into the living room to snoop for it. I found the dusty old book next to a photo album on the shelf of my aunt’s curio. Aunt Martha must have put it there.

I glanced into the kitchen to see if Neil was looking in my direction...

But he was occupied, so I took the journal down and re-read that last entry.

*Control.* It eluded me. Beatrice had found a way to bend the power to her will, rather than be its puppet. How?

The pages held no more clues, and Uncle Edward’s revelations only served to frustrate me more.

One of the floorboards creaked as someone entered the living room, and I quickly put the journal back where I found it. When I turned, Neil was standing in the doorway, drying his hands with the dish towel.

“All done?” I asked.

He smiled back. “It was the best meal I’ve had in a decade,” he said loud enough for Aunt Martha to hear.

“It was nothing, my dear,” she called back, but you could hear the pride in her voice. “I should have hot apple pie ready in about forty minutes, or whenever that old Edward gets himself back inside.”

Neil patted his stomach. “I don’t think I could eat another bite.”

“Don’t be silly,” she countered. “Why don’t you two take a stroll down Canyon Creek; take a walk in the park? Burn off dinner. It’s cool out; take a jacket,” she added, always the mother hen.

With a questioning look at me, Neil reached for our jackets hanging over the back of the Chesterfield. I muttered thanks as he helped me put mine on, and we headed across the highway to the creek.

## Chapter Twenty

**“I was sure** you had forgotten about dinner,” Neil said when we crossed the highway and started walking down the grassy slope toward the river. “When I showed up at your aunt’s she had no idea where you were.”

I blushed, and put a hand on his arm. “I’m so sorry about that. I just had a rough afternoon. Sheriff Burke got himself all worked up over last night and came to put me in handcuffs. Uncle Edward really stepped up to the plate for me, and made the sheriff back off.”

Neil turned his head toward me. “Your uncle did?”

“Yeah. I know. He comes off like he hates everyone in the world, but when it hits the fan, he’s the kind of person you want on your team.”

“So it’s all good now?”

I nodded. “For now. I had to cool off, though; think things through. I lost track of time.”

“Come to any conclusions?” he asked after a moment.

“Actually, I had sort of given up.”

“Given what up?” He sounded surprised.

“Well...” I was uncertain how to tell him about the discovery that someone in my family tree had had this curse, and had learned to control it. He would ask me how I knew that, and then I would have to confess that I had stolen the journal.

I hated bending the truth, but I found myself reluctant to tell him everything.

I gathered up my courage and said, “I had a long talk with my uncle—both he and my aunt know about my ... affliction—and he mentioned that he once saw my great-grandmother summon the power at will and set the lake behind our motel on fire.”

“You’re talking about controlling it,” Neil prompted.

“Yes.” It struck me as odd that he focused on the issue of control rather than the fire.

“Is that what she wrote in her journal?” he asked.

My breath caught in my throat when I looked at him. He knew! But he winked to let me know he wasn’t upset.

“It was kind of obvious what you were doing in the lockup,” he explained. “And I’m not a complete idiot.”

“I’m sorry, Neil. I didn’t mean to deceive you about that.”

“Don’t worry. I’m sure if we get it back into lockup before anyone takes inventory, no one will be the wiser. Did it help? Did you find what you were looking for?”

I gave a half nod. “I got some answers, but many more questions. And now I’m completely frustrated.”

“Yeah, I understand that part.”

I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. “You do?”

“Oh, God, yeah. It’s like a boiler deep inside you; the pressure building and building. You just have to let off the steam once in a while.”

My step faltered. “Neil? What are you talking about?”

He said, “That internal power, of course.”

I stopped completely and stared at him, unblinking, until my eyes hurt. Very slowly, I asked, “Are you telling me that you—?”

“It’s not what you think.” There was a hint of a smile on his face, but it was a bitter smile without any humor. “I don’t have the power of fire; I have something else...”

My mind blanked. I couldn’t process this revelation. I didn’t believe it. But somehow it made sense. He had never been shocked when my powers showed, and had not even batted an eyelid when I confessed that I was afflicted with angel’s fire, as my great-grandmother called it.

“We’re different,” he said, “from each other, but we are not like other people.”

It was as if he could tell that I wasn’t nearly as prepared to believe his story as he was mine. He gestured for us to sit on a bench by the walkway.

On the creek, illuminated by a three-quarter moon, a mother duck showed her ducklings how to swim in a straight line as they made their way back to their nest after a long day of scrounging.

I sat down as if the bench would come alive any moment and bite me.

“You’re probably wondering why it was so easy for me to accept what you told me this afternoon.”

At the time, I didn’t think about it twice; but now that I thought about it, it was highly suspicious. If I hadn’t been so distracted by my own concerns, I might have paid more attention to the signs.

“Let me tell you a bit about myself,” he offered.

I was all ears.

“I grew up in Maine,” he began. “Winters there were harsh, but as a kid, I loved to play in the snow. When I was four years old, I was running across a

frozen river with my older brother. The ice couldn't take our weight. We fell through. He drowned."

I put my hand on his arm gently. "Oh my God!"

Neil spoke in a harsh whisper. "But I lived."

He stared off into the distance. "No one came to save me that day; no one knew we were playing there. I saved myself, not by crawling out of that frozen river, but by making the river *push* me out."

I gasped. "What do you mean, you 'made' the river push you out?"

"Water," was his answer. "Fire, earth, air. I've spent the last few years studying the basic elements. People are fascinated by them, even if they don't consciously think about them. They are the primal powers of the world. Entities all on their own."

I struggled to catch up. I had spent years, not thinking about fire, but worrying about how it controlled me, and how to hide from it.

"Water—like fire—is a living thing, both powerful and destructive. Fire and flood. Infernos and tidal waves."

"Neil," I started to say.

"No, let me finish. This is the hard part, for me. I've never told this to another living soul. You've shared your story with three people. I envy that. I can never share this secret with my brother, or bring him back from the dead and apologize for not saving him. I would gladly trade places with him. My parents never forgave me for surviving."

I put my hand on his shoulder, keenly aware that he suffered a pain as deep as my own.

He said, "It took me a long time to admit that it wasn't my fault. I couldn't have known that I had that power until I needed it. And at four years old, how could I have the wherewithal to control it? For years, I tortured myself with guilt. My downward spiral bottomed out when I was twenty."

He took a deep breath and glanced at me to gauge whether I was still with him; whether I believed him. Of course I did. My own story was not unlike his.

Neil clenched his fists. "I grew up angry at myself, and I often lashed out at my parents and anyone else who was unlucky enough to care about me. But as I grew older, I realized I had to make some kind of effort, or I would forever be alone.

"I started dating, and one night while walking a girl home from the movies, and trying my hardest not to be a jerk, we were jumped by a couple of muggers. I had put myself out there, emotionally, and had made an effort to be a nice guy, but then these jokers come along and make me look bad in front of her."

His eyes grew dark as he remembered. "I think it's both anger and self-

preservation that triggers the power. My anger that night was unlike anything I had ever experienced. The humiliation at being made to look like a fool was too great.

“It was raining lightly, you see, but the next moment it was raining *hard*, like a hail storm. Those hard pellets of water were focused on one spot on the earth: where one of the two muggers stood.”

Neil glanced at me again, to gauge my reaction. He did not turn away as he finished the tale.

“It was me. I directed the rain to pound him relentlessly. A million needles of water pierced his flesh. The screams he made ... I can still hear them in my dreams.”

Neil fell silent a moment, then took a deep breath. “The next thing I know, he’s running away as fast as he can, covering his torn face with his hands.”

I put my hand on his. I didn’t know what to say.

Neil’s voice was quiet, but firm. “I can tell by the look on your face you believe me. Or, should I say, you don’t disbelieve me.”

“I—” I started to say.

Then I stood up. Truth was, I didn’t want to believe it. This was impossible. I had struggled to accept my condition for the past ten years, and in the space of a day, I learned that not only had my great-grandmother had this same affliction, but that an unrelated person also had an elemental power. How many more people had this affliction?

My rational brain knew it made sense, that it all fit together; but my gut instinct was to deny it all and run like hell.

Neil grabbed my arm before I could flee from the truth of it.

He said, “You did the same thing to Barry, twice. He threatened you, and your power defended you by setting his sleeves on fire the other night. And last night you tried to deflect the power by boiling those drinks and that chair. It was you; your will. Tell me I’m wrong.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know. Maybe. It’s not my will!”

“Yes it is,” he insisted. “You and I are the same. We both have an ability to control an element.”

“But I can’t control it; it controls *me*! It’s not an ability—it’s a curse!” I argued.

“It doesn’t have to be.”

I stared deep into his eyes, as if I could scry the information there. I caught my breath.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

He motioned me to sit down again. I did so, and he concluded his story.

“As you can imagine, I was horrified at what I had done that night. My date didn’t say anything to anyone about the incident. What could she say? People would think she was crazy. But she refused to see me again. I was wracked with guilt—I ruined that man’s face—but I didn’t have the courage to turn myself in. No one ever found out what happened.”

Neil wrung his hands.

He said, “It bent me out of shape for a while, but I decided that I would figure out—and control—this thing inside me. I could manipulate water, somehow. I needed to learn exactly how. I also wanted to make up for leaving my brother to die when I could have saved him. I thought joining the fire department would accomplish both things. I figured that in the heat of fighting a fire, maybe my ability would be triggered and I could, I don’t know, direct the water to douse the flames.”

“And did it ... work?” I asked.

Neil nodded. “Yeah. It did. The first few fires I fought, I was frightened enough that my self-preservation instinct kicked in. I could trigger my ability by putting myself in danger, which I did over and over again, until I started to learn how to control it and temper it; focus it. I could also channel it.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What do you mean by that?”

“It’s like a raging emotion,” he explained. “A wild animal that needs to be let out once in a while. I thought, if a building is already burning and will be destroyed, what harm can there be in letting my beast loose? There’s so much water involved in fighting a fire, I could easily test my control by moving it anywhere I wanted. Who could tell the difference?”

He looked up at me to see how I was reacting, and laughed. “As far as you know, I’m some kind of nutcase making all this up.”

“No more than me,” I said.

“Difference is, I saw you in action—twice. All right.” He stood up and held out his hand. “Time for proof.”

Uncertainly, I slipped my fingers in his. “What do you mean?”

“Come, I’ll show you.” He led me to the river’s edge.

Canyon Creek was by no means swift running, but it had a strong current that had caught more than one unguarded summertime swimmer or fisherman by surprise and carried them a dozen miles downstream.

Neil glanced up and down its length to be sure no one was watching.

The bank of the creek had a gentle slope, but we both had to tread carefully not to slip into the cold water. Pulling his sleeve back from his wrist, Neil thrust his open hand into the river.

“Don’t try this at home,” he joked, and then his eyes unfocused.

His lips parted and, if I hadn't known better, it looked as if the essence of Neil had vacated his body, and some alien entity had taken residence.

I noticed then that the flow of the creek was slowing around the area where his hand was, almost imperceptibly at first. Soon, it came to a complete standstill within a ten-foot radius. The rest of the creek flowed around this dead spot, as if avoiding it. And then the water level in that circle began to rise and form a shape. At first, I thought it was a funnel, but as I stared in disbelief, it formed into a giant hand with splayed fingers. It moved closer and closer to Neil. Before it reached him, it came to a stop, and the fingers closed in a loose grip around Neil's.

As if meeting for the first time, Neil and Canyon Creek shook hands, and when I heard the words, "Pleased to meet you," I had to look twice to make sure it was Neil who had spoken.

"That's ... unbelievable," I said when the hand slowly disappeared beneath the surface of the creek, and the current resumed its natural pace.

I swayed and felt dizzy. This was confirmation; I wasn't the only person in the world who had a supernatural ability. I could read about other people all day long, and still that wouldn't bring it home. Seeing it with my own eyes made it real.

The power did exist. There was no coincidence; there were no mind tricks telling me I started those fires by ordinary means and just lied to myself about it.

The power of fire was in me.

Neil could control water.

How many other people in the world had such an ability, and were lost and confused, or scared by the lack of knowledge, or led to believe they were mentally unstable?

As if sensing I was at a crossroads and was struggling to get a grip on this new reality, Neil grabbed my arm.

"Are you all right?"

I spoke breathlessly. "Yeah. I just have to sit down, I think."

He led me back to the bench and we sat, hip to hip.

After a moment, he asked, "So ... what are you thinking?"

I shook my head. "I can barely form a thought. I have so many questions, but I can't for the life of me decide which one to ask first."

"The first thing, I think, is to tell yourself that you believe in it. It's the first stage in acceptance, in control."

"But I can't do that—control it, I mean. It just happens whenever I become extremely angry or afraid."

He nodded affirmatively. "Control can be learned. I heard that mantra you

used the first night with Barry, and again last night. It helped, didn't it? Maybe not completely, but it helped."

I had a new thought. I moved away from him so I could turn and face him.

"How did you find me?" I demanded. "I can believe a lot of things. I can believe in this power. I can believe I am not alone in the world; but I can't believe that it's just a coincidence that you showed up here in Middleton the same week I came home." I stared at him for a heartbeat. "I don't know; maybe it is coincidence. Is it?"

"I've struggled with this all my life," he said to me after a few moments. "For years I avoided becoming too close to anyone; I've never tried to patch things up with my folks. I carried this burden on my own, and I thought I would never meet someone who I could share this secret with."

He cocked his head. "It's not coincidence," he admitted with a disarming smile. "A couple of years after I joined the department, and I developed a measure of control, I had plenty of time to think about things. My thoughts, naturally, led to the assumption, or belief, that I couldn't be the only person in the world with this power. There have been stories of the strange and fantastic for centuries. There has to be a kernel of truth in them."

He looked off to the creek.

"I started researching other incidents, stories of drowning, floods, anything to do with water and death. I read a story about a two year-old boy in Illinois who was caught under a frozen river for three hours, and somehow survived. I took some vacation time and went there to investigate for myself. As it turned out, there was a medical explanation: hypothermia set in and he was preserved in the ice water. This has happened in other cases. There was nothing supernatural about it."

Turning back to me, he said, "But that didn't stop me: for years, whenever I read a story on the internet or heard the slightest rumor, I would go and find out the truth, hoping one day to meet someone who was like me.

"After a time, I had a revelation that this power might not be limited to the element of water; there could be others out there with the power of fire, earth or air. I expanded my search."

I asked, "And that led you to me?"

Neil nodded. "Yeah."

"How?"

He seemed to search for the words. "Now, there's one thing that I haven't told you about. As time passed and I was better able to control water itself, another aspect of the power slowly developed in me."

I blinked. "Aspect?"



He chewed on his lip. "Well, I developed a kind of intuition about things. Like, for instance, if there was a kid trapped in a burning house, I seemed to know exactly what room he was in. I'd be driving down a road and get a sudden urge to take a different route; later I would find out there was construction and I would have been delayed for hours. On long overnight shifts, the guys would play cards; I could always call everyone's bluff, and I seemed to win more than my fair share of hands to the point where one of the veterans offered to punch my lights out for cheating. That kind of thing."

I asked, "You mean, like fortune telling?"

"No." He gave a slight shake of his head and smiled. "I could never see the future in those kind of terms. I've purchased many a lottery ticket and I'm still living paycheck to paycheck. No, this is more like an intuition. People sometimes get hunches; I get them all the time."

"All right," I said, though I wasn't clear on what he was leading up to.

Neil sighed. "Well, I told you earlier that it was Chief Hrzinski who contacted my chief..."

"Yeah," I said, my tone cautious.

"That part was true, but originally, the job was offered to Darryl Lumiere, my lieutenant. When I heard about it, I just had this feeling that I needed to take the job instead. Before I knew it, I convinced Darryl to reject the offer, and campaigned for it for myself."

Neil shrugged. "I didn't know why, at the time, but the first opportunity I got, I hit the internet and dug up every scrap of information about Middleton I could find."

He looked me straight in the eye. "That's when I read about you, and about your past and imprisonment. It only took a phone call to a friend on the police department in Phoenix to find out you were being released on parole a few days before I planned to come out here."

I swallowed hard. Coincidence? Destiny? Fate? There were forces at work here I couldn't understand.

"It was like a breath of fresh air," he said finally, after I didn't respond, "having confirmed that you were, indeed like me. Knowing there is someone you can talk to about this, and who would understand."

An odd thought occurred to me; something that didn't make complete sense. "Since you've done all this research, did you figure out if there was a catalyst for this ability in yourself?"

"You mean, why me? Why you?"

"Sort of," I said. "I told you my great-grandmother Beatrice had this ability. But it seems to have skipped a few generations. Her journal implied her power

was triggered when her husband killed her mother. And for me—” Suddenly, it was very difficult for me to finish that sentence.

“You had a similar trigger event,” Neil guessed, his voice low.

“Yes,” I admitted. “A miscarriage.”

“I’m so sorry.” He fell respectfully silent.

“It’s all right.”

Neil cocked his head. “I never really thought about that. The power being hereditary, I mean. I never heard any stories about any of my ancestors having anything like this. My dad was a fisherman; owned his own boat. My grandfather on my dad’s side was a captain in the Navy, and I think his father was in the Merchant Marines. I guess there’s a seafaring tradition in my family—I’m the first to break that trend. As far as I know, there haven’t been any extraordinary events like mine.”

“So what caused this in us?” I asked aloud.

Neil lowered his eyes. “My brother and I were both drowning; he died and I developed my ability at the same time. For you, your power manifested when you lost your baby. For Beatrice, when her mother died, the fire in her appeared. If I had to guess, this power in us only manifests when someone close to us dies.”

Could that be it?

“When the bond of blood is broken,” I whispered.

Neil looked into my eyes. “Pardon?”

My mind was spinning. There had been so many revelations today, I couldn’t keep up. I wasn’t sure I could process everything; but at the same time, I was like a starving animal—only I was starving for more information.

But Neil interrupted my train of thought. “We should be getting back; your aunt will think we’ve fallen in the river.”

Neil stood, but I grabbed his arm and pulled him back to the bench. “I want to know one more thing.”

“What’s that?”

I gestured to him and then to me. “How did you control it? How do I control it?”

He shrugged. “For me, I stopped resisting it. I let it flow. It’s like balance. The first time you ride a bicycle, you have no balance and fall down. After awhile, I just knew how to ride. You can’t really explain how to keep your balance; you just learn to do it by giving yourself over to your body’s own natural instincts.”

*I embraced the flame.*

*...And I did not end.*

Was that the secret, after all? Give myself over to the fire? Surrender to its

power?

I didn't know if I could do that. I had caused so much pain and destruction in the past ten years; how could I consciously open myself up to more?

On the way back, I struggled with that thought.

## Chapter Twenty-One

**Aunt Martha** had the apple pie cooling on the kitchen window sill when we got back. She spotted us, clucked with delight and corralled us back to the table.

“What took you so long?” she demanded. “Ten more minutes and I would have had to put it back in the oven.” She put the pie on the center of the table and searched for a knife. “Edward, you bump,” she hollered into the living room. “Come and help me serve. Scoop the ice cream for me.”

Uncle Edward was sitting on an armchair trying to read a magazine; he would alternately look at the page through his reading glasses, and then try reading it without. Neither method proved successful. That’s what happens when you pick a random pair of glasses from a pharmacy without consulting an eye doctor. At his wife’s summons, he tossed the magazine on the settee, folded the glasses, slid them into his shirt pocket, and then pushed himself to his feet.

I didn’t think there was room for another bite of food after the enormous meal earlier, but the moment Aunt Martha put the pie in front of me, I dug in without hesitation. Neil also had no problem finishing his dessert.

“My, oh my,” Aunt Martha said. “You must have found your appetite on that long walk.”

I reddened. “I guess we did. Thank you, it was delicious.”

She smiled with delight. “All right, now who’s up for a cup of coffee?”

Neil raised a restraining hand. “Oh, no, I can’t. I’d love to, but I have an early day tomorrow. My first official day,” he explained. “I start at five. Thank you so much for the supper. It was perfect.”

“Don’t worry yourself about it at all.” Aunt Martha waved him off. “It was my pleasure.”

“I’ll walk you,” I offered, trying hard not to blush at the knowing look Aunt Martha shot me.

\* \* \*

Neil’s motel room was only a couple of hundred feet from the bungalow, but we took our time walking the distance.

“I want to thank you,” Neil said.

“Me?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “For trusting me, and opening up to me. And believing me. I’ve never told another soul about myself. It’s not as easy as it looks.”

“You can say that again. So,” I added, “what do we do now?”

“I don’t know, really. If there’s a reason for this, it’s beyond me. These powers didn’t come with an instruction manual. I guess, maybe, if you want, we can figure it out together.”

I felt a flush go through my body. The thought of having a kindred spirit gave me a sense of purpose that had eluded me all my life. I had a lot of emotions running riot at the moment, and I needed time to sort through them, but I felt like I was at the beginning of something wonderful and positive. I needed that.

I didn’t want to rush into anything, though, no matter how fantastic I felt at the moment.

“That sounds good to me,” I told Neil. “But I just ... I don’t know how to say this...”

“You need some time?”

“No. Yeah. I mean, listen, I don’t want it to sound like I’m not happy to find you, but...”

He smiled. “No worries. Baby steps, right? It’s been a very long day. And tomorrow is going to be long, too. My shift ends around two in the afternoon. You start at three?”

“Yeah.”

He said, “Why don’t we meet up at the Finer Diner around two, then? It’ll be a late lunch for you, and early dinner for me.”

I smiled. “All right, that sounds good.”

We had reached his room, and he paused at the door.

“Look, I don’t want to scare you off or anything, but—” He leaned toward me, his motions awkward and uncertain, and gave me a gentle kiss on the cheek.

I didn’t know how to react. At the same time, I felt giddy, and everything in my body seemed to dance with excitement. Then Neil spoke again. “No more secrets, I promise.”

He gave me a light laugh and a wink. I smiled back, but icy fingers of guilt ran down my spine.

Neil had completely opened up to me, but I had not been totally honest with him. It was something I wanted to take to my grave, and it was the main reason I was frightened by the thought of surrendering to the power.

There had been one incident in my life where I had called on the power on purpose.

I could barely wait for him to disappear inside. The moment his door closed, I

turned and headed as fast as I could to my own room before I completely broke down.

All this time, I had tried my damndest not to think about the one and only time I had deliberately summoned the power.

\* \* \*

I was originally sentenced to five years in prison for manslaughter; more specifically, negligence resulting in death. They couldn't prove I had any intent, and I didn't have a track record of any arson-related offenses prior to the fire. That I had a juvenile record for minor incidents led the jury to believe that it was in my nature to be reckless, and the judge added that I was headed down a path that would lead to more and more serious crimes. He had passed sentence without batting an eye.

My court-appointed defender had assured me I wouldn't do more than three years as long as I attended counseling, toed the line, and did my best to be a model inmate. But sometimes, you could make every effort to follow the rules in prison, and still end up in deep trouble.

They don't send nice people to prison, and when you wrong someone inside, they tend not to forgive you. As a matter of fact, they can hold a grudge for a very long time.

Cindi Peterson had held her grudge against me for nearly three years. She had been my cellmate that first night in prison, when I lost control of the power, and it was she who I had nearly killed. It had frightened her to the core. When people are scared, they can react in different ways. For Cindi, she carried that fear deep inside her and she waited for the opportunity to make the world right again. The only way she could do that was to make me suffer physically as she had suffered mentally. In order for her to feel safe, I had to die.

During the first three years inside, I had no idea that she was waiting and planning her revenge on me. Prison life is a life of routine, and the days and years can blend in to one another as time passes. We performed the same chores every day, shared the same gossip, ate the same bland food. The structured schedule of an inmate is designed to deaden the mind.

Even still, arguments happened, fights were not uncommon, and sometimes, when the loneliness crept in, people found solace in the embrace of whoever was closest. And sometimes, because there was a higher ratio of male guards, the female prisoners occasionally attempted to entice one of them into an intimate circumstance for various reasons: trading favors, special treatment, access to outside goods and contraband; or even simply for mutual company or pleasure.

The guards were under strict orders against fraternizing with the inmates, but more often than you would care to believe, indiscretions happened. When Cindi found a younger, very naïve guard who had recently undergone a divorce, Donny Riker, she homed in on him and worked her own brand of magic. A little flirting, a few dropped hints, and the two began a year-long tryst. After awhile, he was so whipped and confused by her head games, she could easily play him like a marionette. She was getting out in six months, and she made promises and plans with him for after her release.

I found this all out afterwards. The prison rumor mill goes into overdrive when anything extraordinary happens, and among the dozen or so stories I heard through the grapevine, one core line involved Cindi getting Donny to follow and corner me in the storage room one night.

The plan was for him to make it look like an accident, but when he followed me inside and closed the door behind him, I didn't gasp, scream or try to run as he expected. I merely stared at him. He hesitated, uncertain what he had gotten himself into.

Truth was I was far too surprised to react. My thoughts had been elsewhere, and I couldn't figure out what unspoken rule or protocol I had breached to get a guard to come after me.

"It's time to die," he said finally, and pulled out his baton.

My power immediately kicked in and I felt my skin burning.

"My eyes can see!" I shouted at him. This was the first time I had used the mantra, and I was far too panicked to recite it in a calming manner.

My reaction took him aback. "What?"

I continued yelling. "My tongue can taste!"

I clenched my fists, and I could feel the heat in me rise as I continued shouting the mantra. "My mouth can smile!"

I was scared, but I don't think that's how I came across to Donny.

"You really *are* some kind of crazy," he yelled, eyes wide like someone who'd had far too much coffee and not nearly enough sleep. "Cindi was right; they should have given you the needle."

With that, he raised his baton over his head and advanced, his eyes wide with apprehension.

Before he crossed half the distance between us there came a rattling at the door. Through the small frosted glass window, I saw a shape.

Donny turned just as Cindi, expectant and elated, burst inside. I have no idea who she bribed to get there, but I had a sudden sinking sensation deep in the pit of my stomach.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Donny demanded.

Cindi glared at me. "I had to watch. I want to make sure the bitch dies."

"It's too dangerous. Let me take care of it." He turned back and leveled his eyes at me, and I could see the commitment in his gaze. Barry had had that same look in his eyes whenever he was about to throw a heavy beating on someone. There was no going back from this. No one would hear me if I hollered at the top of my lungs. If I just stayed there, Donny would bludgeon me to death in front of his lover.

For the first time in my life, I purposely did not restrain the power. I stopped shouting the mantra, and instead I willed the fire to come forth.

If I were going to die, I would take Donny and Cindi with me.

The dry papers and folders inside the cabinets ignited like tinder. The overhead fluorescents exploded in a shower of sparks and chemical powder. Windows shattered as my would-be assailants screamed when thousands of shards and splinters pierced their skin.

The walls buckled and the roof groaned. I became an inferno, and the heat radiated out from me with such power that the flesh on Donny's face melted before he died. He didn't even have time to scream.

I was horrified, but at the same time, I felt an overwhelming sense of release that made my knees shake. The power coursed through my veins like a wild beast.

I was so completely out of control that I didn't even know who I was anymore. It was almost as if I were a different person, and the thing inside me was an entity all on its own. I had succumbed to its desire to be free, and now I couldn't harness it.

Cindi tried to run from my rage, but she was not fast enough. Her scream was cut off as a wave of my fire washed over her.

That scream was the last sound I heard; as with the first time the fire had taken control of me, I passed out. The building continued to burn around me.

The next day, when I woke in the infirmary, I was completely unharmed. The administration building, I found out from the orderly, had been reduced to ash.

They never found any signs of Cindi or Donny, and never suspected that their cremated remains were among the ruins. What they assumed was that Cindi had somehow escaped prison with the aid of Donny and me. That I was found among the burnt wreckage—a convicted arsonist—was enough circumstantial evidence for them to press multiple charges: I got an additional seven years tacked on to my original sentence for destruction of property, attempted escape, and aiding and abetting.

I had murdered Cindi and Donny. In a court of law, I could have pleaded self-defense, but there had not been and never would be a trial. For years I punished



myself for unleashing the power on human beings, whether it had been justified or not.

During the remainder of my sentence I withdrew emotionally from everyone except for Kyra; I was alone in a prison of solitude, and felt I had warranted no less.

But now I met someone wonderful, someone who was like me: a kindred spirit who seemed to be everything I had always needed. Someone who had actually sought me out.

How could I accept Neil into my life, knowing that I had committed the vilest crime one person could inflict on another?

I had killed two people. It was self-defense, but at the same time I had *wanted* them to die. What kind of a person was I?

I did not deserve to love, or be loved.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

**I woke late** the next morning and felt like a new woman with a renewed lease on life.

My exhaustion had taken over and I slept for eleven hours straight. It wasn't until I poured a hot cup of coffee from the one-cup brewer in my room and took a long, wincing sip that I realized that the weekend was not a dream. It had all happened.

Barry. The fight at The Trough. The journal. The confessions. And Neil. My thoughts lingered on that last bit.

Somehow, I felt both thrilled and frightened at the prospect of knowing another person who was cursed with these elemental abilities. Two nights ago, I had my bags packed and I was set to walk away from everything I had known all my life. So much had happened in such a short time, I had trouble getting it all straight in my mind; but one thing I was certain of right now was that I was meant to come back to Middleton. I belonged here, not just because of the ties to family and friends. For the first time since I was a teenager I felt myself drawn to another person.

I didn't deserve to love ... but I wanted it. I found myself dwelling on that kiss Neil planted on my cheek. Gently touching the spot where his lips had made contact with my skin, I felt a flush emanating from my stomach and radiating throughout my entire body.

I suppose people who are most suited find each other more attractive. In my youth, I had found Barry's rebellious personality appealing. Over the last decade, my outlook on life had completely changed. When I thought I was a freak of nature, I never entertained the thought of a personal relationship. Now that I was no longer the only one of my kind, I found myself drawn to Neil.

After quickly eating a stale blueberry muffin, I showered and dressed. I even put an iron through my hair to give it a bit of bounce.

The weather was seasonably mild when I stepped out of my room, but I still wore my jeans jacket in case the wind picked up. I walked past the main office and saw my uncle hovering over the ancient computer and grimacing in growing frustration. Technology was not his strong suit.

Ordinarily, I would have made a detour to help him, but I knew I had taken a little longer to get ready than I had originally planned. If I didn't put a hustle on it, I was going to be late for my lunch date with Neil.

The Finer Diner was only a few blocks away, and I made good time. When I got there, I was a little startled to see Neil standing out front with a large paper bag.

He flashed a grin of welcome that I automatically returned.

"Hey. What's up?" I asked him when I got close.

He raised the bag up to show me. "I took the liberty of ordering something to go."

I blinked. "Go? Go where?"

"I got to thinking last night about a few things, and I think we can make this a working lunch."

In a way, I was crestfallen. I had spent the morning hoping that this might be more of a romantic meal, perhaps our first real date. But I have to admit, I was very curious about what conclusions he'd drawn. Valiantly hiding my disappointment, I nodded.

"All right, what did you have in mind?"

"You said there was a small lake behind your aunt and uncle's motel?"

I blinked, not understanding why he wanted to know that. "Yeah."

"Why not have a picnic there?"

Actually, that sounded quite romantic to me.

"Why not?" I said with a smile.

\* \* \*

We swung by the motel on the way. Uncle Edward was still fighting the computer, and when I asked him if I could be a little late, he grumbled his assent.

"Not too late, mind you; I have to make a deposit at the bank before it closes."

"They have a 24-hour ATM there," I reminded him, and that earned me a scowl.

He said, "That'll be the day I trust one of those infernal machines. I'd rather a real live person I can yell at."

I pressed my luck when I asked if we could borrow a few blankets, and he looked at me over the rim of his reading glasses.

"Any damage will come out of your pay," he warned.

"Thanks, Uncle Edward."

\* \* \*

They called it Circle Lake, but it's really more of an overgrown pond. I'm sure there's a hard definition somewhere that will explain the difference, but if there were a line when determining which one it is, Circle Lake would fall right in the middle of it.

On the weekends, families would picnic in the surrounding area. During the week, it was rare to see anyone out there. Today was no exception: just the birds, the sagebrush, and us.

When we got there, I spread the blankets out while Neil unpacked our lunch. Club sandwiches and potato chips, with coleslaw and two big bottled waters.

The simplicity of the lunch took me a little off guard. I guess I was hoping for something a little more extravagant, maybe some assorted cheeses, French bread, sliced fruits and chocolate. I know I shouldn't have read anything in to it, but I started to doubt. Of course, I realized my feelings for Neil were only just blossoming. Although I found him physically attractive, I hadn't thought of him in more romantic terms until yesterday. The new connection we had developed in the last two days had stirred emotions in me that were more personal than intimate. I wondered, however, whether those feelings would, or could, be reciprocated.

He wasn't exactly doting on me like a lovesick puppy. Instead, he stared out at the lake, lost not in my eyes, but in his own thoughts.

"So, what now?" I interrupted him.

"Now we help each other."

I nodded. "All right. How?"

"Well, you said your uncle saw your great-grandmother set the lake on fire. Do you think you can do that?"

"I tried yesterday," I admitted. "It was a waste of time."

He stood up and took a few measured paces toward the edge of the lake. A moment later, I followed.

"In both of us," said Neil, "the ability originally manifested only when we experienced the death of someone close. Afterwards, the power is triggered by extreme emotions."

In the distance, a fish broke the surface of the water in its quest for insects.

Neil narrowed his eyes. "It took me a long time to learn to channel my power over water. But with me, there is a difference."

I asked, "How do you mean?"

"I can't create water out of nothing; I can only control it." He looked at me. "You can *cause* objects to ignite; you can *create* fire. A small distinction, but maybe what works for me won't work for you."

After a moment of thought, he continued: "There are also limits. For example,

I think the most I can do is change the course of a stream of water, like from a fire hose, and direct it to hit certain areas. I can cause rain drops to splinter into needles, and can make a small volume of water—say about equal to my own weight—form cool shapes, like that hand from last night. I can't, however, change the course of a river, or drain this lake, or anything quite so dramatic."

I said, "That seems quite impressive to me. I mean, that you can do those things when you want."

"It takes a bit of effort. I have to put myself in something like a hypnotic state. You know, like when you're very tired and driving home late at night. Before you realize it, you're there and you have no recollection of how you got there. So I was thinking, maybe in that way you can also trigger your own power."

I said, "In her journal, my great-grandmother wrote that she had to embrace the power and surrender to it. But I have no idea how to do that."

"Can we try an experiment?" he asked, looking at me directly for the first time since we finished eating.

"Sure."

He gestured to my torso with both hands. "The fire, the power, is in there; it's in you all the time. But it doesn't have any focus; it is held back by your conscious mind. When you get very angry, your subconscious takes over and releases the power as a defense mechanism. It's uncontrolled and dangerous, though."

Neil dropped to one knee right at the water's edge.

"Try this," he said. "Imagine all the sunshine that hits the entire planet. Now imagine that sunshine gets focused and concentrated on a smaller and smaller area; like through a magnifying glass."

He motioned for me to kneel beside him. "Put your hand out toward the center of the lake. Go ahead."

I did so, and tried to focus my mind as he instructed.

After a full minute, when nothing happened, I slapped the water with my hand in frustration. "It's not working."

"Nothing to worry about," he said in a calm tone. "We're just exploring right now. Maybe it's about trust."

"Trust ... in you?"

He shook his head. "No, in yourself; that if you release the monster, you won't lose control of it."

Was that it? Was I simply afraid of the fire? Was I afraid that it would consume everything in sight, including Neil?

"You've spent your life trying to bottle it up," he continued. "It's going to take you awhile to trust yourself. Try again. Don't worry. If the fire gets out of hand, I

have a water source right here. I can put the flames out.”

I took a deep breath, willed myself to relax, and extended my hand out again. My entire body vibrated from the effort of concentration. Veins stood out on my neck. A minute passed, and I was ready to throw in the towel.

I balled my hands into fists of frustration. “I don’t feel anything.”

“Patience,” Neil schooled.

“It’s not one of my virtues.” I let out a humorless laugh. “Usually it’s an act of sheer will for me to keep my temper.”

“It took me months, years to get a handle on it,” he said. “You’re not going to master this in an hour or even a day.”

“If I don’t figure this out,” I shot back, “someone is going to get hurt.”

Neil put his hands on my shoulders. “I know. It’s frustrating. But maybe you’re trying too hard to let it go.”

“Huh?”

“What you said a moment ago. It’s an act of sheer will to keep it in. That’s what you use your mantra for?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Where did you say you learned it?”

“My cellmate in prison, Kyra. She was into all this new age metaphysical stuff. Healing through meditation, channeling your inner-self. She was a good friend.”

At that moment I realized how much I missed her. I felt a sharp pang in my heart and my eyes misted over. If not for her, I would never have made it through those first few years.

“Was?” asked Neil.

“She was in on a drug charge. She’d been clean since I first met her, but her history of use, combined with her weight—she was a big girl—was a recipe for disaster. She had a heart attack in the middle of the night about five years ago.”

I fell into a thoughtful silence.

“I’m sorry,” said Neil.

“But she’s the one who taught me the mantra. It really helped me focus whenever I started to feel the power creep out. For years I’ve been able to keep the fire inside. I thought I finally had it under control; that I was safe to come home again. That’s the only reason I accepted parole. If I’d known it was going to be so hard to keep control on the outside, I would have opted to serve out the rest of my sentence in prison.”

“I have an idea,” said Neil.

“What?”

“Well, if your mantra works, even to a small degree, in quelling the power,

maybe you can use it for the opposite effect.”

“How do you mean?” I asked.

“In a way, the mantra is a means of finding your calm center. It’s like self-hypnosis; same thing I do. Why not try and use your mantra to channel your energy out instead of in?”

I thought about it a moment. “I guess it’s worth a shot.”

I faced the water again and closed my eyes.

“Relax,” Neil coached. “Recite your mantra. And when you are completely at peace and in control, release all your internalized energy at the water.”

A deep breath, and then I began to speak:

“My eyes can see.

“My tongue can taste.

“My mouth can smile.

“My lungs can breathe.

“My heart can beat.

“My stomach can digest.

“My legs can walk.

“My body is calm.”

I took a deep breath.

“I am in control.”

For the briefest of moments, nothing happened...

But then a tiny wisp of steam emanated from a spot in front of me. I saw a single bubble float up from under the surface, then more and more. Radiating outward from that point, the water began to boil and froth.

Steam rose into the air with a hiss, and the lake took on a darker color as the affected area increased. The bubbles grew larger, and when they burst, they splashed hot water toward us.

“All right, pull back,” Neil instructed.

I barely registered his voice.

A spark shot from the water with a snap.

“Control it!” he said.

Red balls of flame erupted from the lake, as if the entire surface had been covered in oil.

Neil’s voice rose in pitch. “Darcy! Stop it! I can’t do it!”

From my periphery, I saw him holding his scalded hand. He had tried to use his power over water to fight the fire, and must have gotten too close.

“You have to shut it down!” he said.

My forehead beaded with perspiration as I willed the heat to lessen.

Slowly, the flames on the water diminished. The water stopped bubbling and

the lake was serene once more.

His face relaxed. "You did it!"

I was completely drained. "My God, that was hard! Are you all right?"

Neil glanced at his hand. "Yeah, just stings a bit. A little bit of ice and I'll be fine. What matters is you were able to summon the fire on command; and then you were able to stop it. That's more than I had hoped."

"I did stop it, didn't I?"

"Now all you need is practice. Soon, you'll get to the point where you can summon or stop it without the mantra. You can make it happen just by thinking it."

"Thank you!" I threw my arms around him, and after a tentative moment, he returned the hug.

"My pleasure," he said.

It was an impulse, and I had no awareness that I was doing it, but somewhere deep inside me a passion had grown to bursting. I found myself kissing Neil full on the lips, hungry and urgent. My tongue found his and I felt him stiffen against my hip.

Then, as if aware of his reaction and embarrassed by it, he detached himself and looked uncomfortable.

"Say, it's almost time for you to get back to your shift. Your uncle's going to be mad as a hare," said Neil.

I was so elated with my newfound control, and taken by my instant desire for him, I had completely forgotten about my mundane life.

The pang of rejection when Neil broke off our embrace made me feel uncertain, as if my feelings for him were one-sided. Maybe he didn't find me attractive. I tried to hide my embarrassment.

Keeping my voice light, I asked, "Hey, can we come back tomorrow? I can practice then. Maybe I'll have more control."

"Sure," he said, and gave me half a smile. "Same time; same place. I'll bring the lunch again."

"Deal."

He got to his feet and held out his hand to help me up. Together, we packed up our picnic and returned to the motel.

I dropped him off at his room, and before he went inside, he stood there awkwardly, as if wanting to say something.

Just as I was about to give up on him, he confused me completely: he leaned toward me and gave me a quick peck on the cheek.

"Tomorrow, then?"

He went inside, leaving me completely baffled and disoriented. If I lived to be



a hundred, I would never figure men out.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

**I couldn't wait** a full day to practice using my power. Not only was I far too excited to sit on my hands, but I needed something to distract me from running my mind in circles about my feelings for Neil.

Once Uncle Edward finished dressing me down for being tardy, he headed off down town, muttering about how he would probably get to the bank too late.

As soon as I saw his truck pull out onto the highway and disappear into the distance, I hurried through my afternoon rounds. Mondays were usually quiet for front office duties, but clean up after the weekend guests took quite a bit of effort. Aunt Martha typically finished cleaning rooms by two in the afternoon. After that, she would most likely be back at the bungalow preparing dinner.

I made a quick detour to their place and saw that it was empty. Both Uncle Edward and Aunt Martha were elsewhere. When I was satisfied that all my daily chores were up to date and no one was around, I returned to the office and pulled the blinds down.

I reviewed the reservations list and saw there were only three guests expected tonight. Two had already checked in. The third—a travelling salesman—had left a note that he would be arriving late. Other than drop-ins, I was looking at a quiet evening.

There was a narrow table next to the counter that Uncle Edward used for his filing system. Mesh baskets held papers and forms for upcoming reservations, current guests, and completed visits awaiting more permanent filing in the cabinet in the back office.

I temporarily moved those baskets to the floor against the wall to make some space.

I'd swiped an ashtray and a box of matchbooks from the cleaning cart in the storage room already, and I placed the ashtray on the table and balanced one of the matchbooks in the center.

I set a large glass of water on the counter. There was an extinguisher close to hand if things got out of control.

I remembered what Neil had told me about combustion. Certain chemicals could ignite when combined or exposed to oxygen; that was a rarity. More often

than not, a combustible material requires some kind of mechanism, whether it is friction, an alternate heat source, or another chemical.

According to Neil's theory, I was a mechanism. I could initiate that reaction through force of will. Earlier, I'd ignited the hydrogen in the water of the lake, causing it to boil, spark and vaporize. With the pack of matches in front of me, I was determined to measure how precise my control could be.

With another quick look between the narrow slits of the blinds to be sure I would not be interrupted, I pushed my hair back, sat on a chair and faced the ashtray.

I concentrated.

In my head, I recited the mantra to focus myself.

The release of power at the lake had been widespread and unfocused. This time, I imagined a very tiny spark beginning at the tip of the phosphorous head of a matchstick.

At first, there was nothing and I faltered, thinking that perhaps I was doing something wrong.

Then I saw the smallest wisp of smoke curl at the tip of the match; a fraction of a second later, the match head burst into flame. Within a heartbeat, the rest of the matches in the pack lit up in a chain reaction. I yelped with delight at my accomplishment. Quickly, I picked up the matchbook by its base and blew the flames out. A car pulled up and I grabbed the room spray and gave the office a good once-over just as an older couple walked in looking for a room.

\* \* \*

It was too chancy to practice in the office, so I schooled myself to show some restraint. Toward the end of my shift, however, when I took out a couple of garbage bags to the large industrial bins around the back of the motel, I saw a broken broom handle poking out of the container.

After I threw the bags in, I pulled the handle out. The pack of matches I had ignited earlier was highly combustible. It didn't require much of a reaction to set them alight. A dried length of wood, however, would require a little more effort.

Hidden by the building on one side, and the hill behind the motel on the other, I decided to make a second attempt at summoning the power.

I held the shaft out like a wand, and focused on the end. The tip began to smolder, and within moments, flame erupted from the wood like a torch. This time, I had planned on trying to use my power to cause the flame to stop burning, but nothing I did helped. The entire handle was on fire.

Uselessly, I waved the stick around to put out the flame, but that only made it

worse. Finally, I threw the handle to the ground and stomped on it to put the fire out.

At the lake, I was able to stop the fire. Or was I? When Neil coached me to pull back the power, did I simply remove myself from the equation, and stop acting as an accelerant? Once I removed the mechanism, did the existing fire just burn itself out against the water?

I would have to experiment more. But one thing was certain, it was flirting with disaster to practice here. I would have to wait until I got back to the lake when no one was around, except Neil.

\* \* \*

That night, I resisted the urge to stop by Neil's door and knock when I got off my shift. For one thing, he had to be up for work early in the morning and, light sleeper or not, he probably wouldn't appreciate the interruption. I also needed some time to figure out how I felt about him. I needed to know if my attraction to him was real, or if I was misinterpreting my relief at discovering I was no longer alone in the universe.

I rested the flat of my hand against his door, as if I could sense his sleeping form inside.

Finally, I retreated to my room and crawled into bed. It took forever to fall asleep, and when I did, my dreams were filled with anxiety and anticipation.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

**I woke very** early the next morning; I just couldn't sleep. Excitement and adrenaline can do that to you. After checking the clock and realizing I would not be able to sit still for hours until my lunch date with Neil, I decided to get out of the room and do something productive. I showered and got dressed in record time and went in search of fresh coffee.

Aunt Martha was finishing up the room next to mine when I came out and she greeted me with her usual cheery smile.

"Darcy! Sorry I missed you last night."

I dimly remember Uncle Edward mumbling something about her visiting a cousin up in Sedona—a weekly ritual—and leaving him to fend for himself in the kitchen. I wondered if he had used the same solution as I did: microwave dinners. Not the healthiest choice, but who had time to cook?

"How was your trip?" I asked.

Aunt Martha smiled. "Good as always. Doris let me win at pinochle again. She thinks I'll stop visiting if I lose too many pennies. You're up early."

"Got some things to do in town."

She pointed to the kitchen. "Make sure you start your day right. There's a stack of pancakes on the counter. Just throw them in a pan for a minute to warm them up. Orange juice in the fridge."

"Thanks, Aunt Martha," I said and kissed her on the cheek before I headed off to their bungalow to help myself to breakfast.

\* \* \*

After making sure I cleaned up after myself, I headed to the front office to check in with Uncle Edward. He was sitting in the back reading a newspaper. He was still fighting with those reading glasses.

"Hey," I said by way of greeting. He looked up over the rims of his spectacles and it took his eyes a moment to focus.

"Morning," he replied, and shook the paper to straighten it out. "Coming in early to make up for yesterday?"

"Uh, no. I'm going to walk down town, maybe stop by the hardware store. Do

you need anything?"

"Yeah. I have a list." He put the paper down on the desk and searched for a scrap of paper on which he had written down a few needed supplies. I grabbed the list and scanned it.

"I can't carry this back by myself," I complained.

"Take the truck," he said.

"I don't have a license."

He blinked at me, and then realized the truth of it. "I forgot. We're going to have to remedy that one day. Get you some learners and lessons. All right, just grab the toilet paper and light bulbs. Tell Tom to deliver the rest when he's got time."

I nodded. "Will do."

He went back to his paper without saying goodbye, and as I left, I shook my head and silently laughed to myself. A tough nut to crack, indeed, but not impossible.

\* \* \*

Tom Derring had owned Derring & Sons hardware store since I could remember. What was odd was that he didn't have any sons; instead, he had four daughters and none of them wanted anything to do with selling hammers and electric saws. Growing up, it seemed he could always be found behind the counter of his store, giving well-meaning fix-it-up advice and a hometown smile to anyone who patronized his establishment. Six days a week, ten hours a day. The same generation as my uncle, he had a similar work ethic.

When I entered the store, I fully expected him to be there, gray hair and all, but I was more than a little startled to see Troy Hartman sitting on a stool behind the cash register. I suddenly felt sick to the stomach, and wanted nothing more than to get out of there as fast I could.

Troy was reading a comic book, reciting the dialog out loud, and grinning like an idiot. He spotted me straight away, and his smile faded.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

That instantly got my back up. "I could ask you the same question. Where's Mr. Derring?"

Troy blinked. He hadn't expected me to act as if he wasn't a threat. The fact was, without Barry and Frank, he wasn't. Troy was a dyed-in-the-wool follower. Even back in the days when Barry and I were still married, I could push Troy around when I wanted. Although I had no desire for any confrontation, I had a mission to accomplish, and no weasel-necked boy in a man's body was going to

stop me today.

As if sensing that I wasn't going to roll over to his initial posturing, Troy immediately changed tactics. In an obvious attempt to hide his discomfiture he tried to be funny and dismissive.

"Old Tom? He's semi-retired now. Geezer's getting up there in years. Time takes its toll, don't you know?"

"Oh?" I said, and pursed my lips together.

"Yeah. He only comes in two or three days a week now, and usually when he wants to bust my chops or gossip with the ranchers. Can be a real pain in the ass sometimes, you know."

With his subservient tone, he might as well have flipped over on his back and asked me to tickle his stomach.

"I've got a list for the Lazy Z Motel," I told him. "Do you still deliver?"

"Uh, no, not really. But, uh, when Old Tom comes in, I'm sure he'd be happy to bring this stuff over to your uncle. Give him a chance to shoot his mouth off for an hour, if you know what I mean."

I dropped Uncle Edward's list on the counter, glad that I didn't have to do the motel's shopping.

Troy glanced at the list. "I'll just put this all on account."

"I've got a few things I need to pick up for myself. Uncle Edward said I could put it on his account and pay him later," I lied, but mischievously I wanted to see how far I could push Troy.

He shrugged. "Uh, yeah, sure. No problem."

My original intention had been to pick up a few inexpensive items for that afternoon's experiments: wooden spindles, rail spikes, and maybe a small fireproof safe. I wanted to see what objects I could ignite, and how much effort each required. The matches had been easy, but the wooden broom handle had been a little more difficult. I needed to measure how much willpower I needed for different materials.

Before I had a chance to begin filling my own shopping list, Troy coughed in his throat and I saw his eyes harden.

"Actually, maybe I should call over to the Z and see if your uncle is all right with that."

"Pardon me?"

"Come to think of it," he said, his voice turning hard, "I'm not sure Old Tom is coming around today, so maybe we can't deliver this stuff after all."

Troy had developed a backbone from somewhere, and I figured out the source a split second after I heard the door chime.

I turned around and saw Barry. His unblinking eyes never left me as he made

his way down the aisle to the counter.

"Barry," I said in a low voice. "I don't want any trouble."

"I don't want any trouble, either," he said evenly.

"Look, what happened at The Trough—"

He shook his head. "Don't worry about it, Darcy. It was a misunderstanding. I had too many shots of tequila. Things got out of hand."

Startled at the unexpected calmness in his voice, I could only stare at him.

He said, "I heard my father and your uncle had some words. I never wanted it to get that far."

"Barry, I'm not sure what you want." I was suddenly uncomfortable.

"Listen," he said. "It was a shock, you coming back to town, is all. I think I just, I don't know, reacted the wrong way."

"The wrong way?"

I could tell he was making an effort to keep his words calm. He threw up his hands and shrugged. "What can I say? I'm an emotional guy. I get carried away. You know me."

I narrowed my eyes. "Yeah. I know you."

"Hey, I'm being nice."

I glanced back at Troy, who was watching on with anticipation. To Barry, I said, "All right, so, you're being nice. What do you want from me?"

"Well, why don't we try to be friends?"

My eyes went wide. "Are you serious?"

"Come on. All right, you're right. I was an ass. What do you want me to say? I'm sorry? I'm sorry, all right. I just have a problem trying to say what I feel."

"And what do you feel?"

"Well," he said, "I think maybe I still have some feelings for you."

That took me completely by surprise. "What?"

"Yeah," said Barry. "It's not so strange. I mean, we were married and all. You must have loved me at some point."

"I must have been deluded at some point," I shot back, and earned a frown from him.

His eyes grew dark. "I was being nice. There's no call to be a bitch."

"So, now I'm a bitch?" I knew I was baiting him, but he had stirred some disturbing feelings in me. Feelings of rage. In the back of my head, I cautioned myself not to lose control of the situation.

"I didn't come here to argue," he said, though his smile had transformed into a grimace.

"What did you come here for?"

"I don't know." He shot Troy a look; for the first time seeming uncomfortable.



“I thought maybe I could make it up to you somehow and we could, I don’t know, maybe get back together or something.”

I laughed outright, utterly shocked by his suggestion. “Not in a million years.”

His face reddened. “Then what the hell did you come back to Middleton for?”

“Certainly not for you, Barry. I have every right to be here, just like you. This is my home—where I grew up. My family is here, same as yours.”

I could sense that black anger growing in him. I knew provoking him would only lead to another confrontation, the results of which I did not want to explore. Mentally, I took a deep breath. I was stronger than this.

I put up my hands. “Barry, I’ll take your word for it; you didn’t come in here to get into a fight. I believe you. But now I want you to believe me. I didn’t come back here for you. The reasons I came back had nothing to do with you. Let me speak in plain English: I’m not getting back together with you. Not now, not ever. I just want to live my own life. You go your way, I’ll go mine. Can’t we do that? If you ever had any true feelings for me, can’t you just let it go? Move on with your life?”

He didn’t reply; he just kept staring at me with dark eyes.

I stepped around Barry so that he wasn’t between me and the exit.

“Please, Barry,” I said finally, “just leave me be.”

With that, I headed for the exit, abandoning both my shopping list and my uncle’s.

“Chickenshit,” I heard Troy say in a low voice as I left, but I didn’t know if his accusation was directed at me, or at Barry.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

**I was vibrating** when I left the hardware store. *Get back together?* What the hell was Barry thinking? Was he completely delusional?

It wasn't quite noon and I knew there were still a few hours before I met Neil for lunch, but I couldn't wait. I was so outraged at Barry's audacity that I could barely contain myself. I needed to blow off some steam, and now that I had had a taste of how to control and focus the power, I realized the best way to work off my frustration was to release the fire within me.

I marched back toward home, but before I got within sight, I veered off behind the motel and headed for the lake.

No more matches and broom handles. This time, I was going to focus all my power on the lake—give it everything I had.

A complete release and a complete surrender—that's what I needed to do.

When I got there, I had enough presence of mind to ensure there were no onlookers.

I raised my hands to shoulder height and recited my mantra. Focusing on the lake, I willed the fire to unleash itself on the water. In a way, I thought that if I drained myself of the flames, if I exhausted myself by burning the lake, maybe the power would leave me, at least for a little while. Then, I could pretend I was a normal person.

I felt it build in me, the same feeling as when a roller coaster edged higher and higher toward the precipice of a high drop. Click, click, click. The anticipation built. The pressure inside me intensified.

With a primal scream, I yelled out at the lake, willing the entire body of water to burst into flame, to vaporize.

Within a fifty yard radius, the lake began to bubble, lightly at first and then building to a furious boil. Moments later, the entire surface ignited like a gas barbeque. A loud crack split the air and, as if I had been struck by lightning, my entire body was consumed by the fire.

I screamed and tried to slap the flames out with my hands. My clothes disintegrated before my eyes, falling away in a cloud of ash and leaving me completely naked. I was too shocked to worry about modesty.

I waved my arms around in a desperate attempt to put out the flames, but then the fire surrounding me started to flare and spit. It danced on my bare skin like it was a living thing, a separate entity that had been hiding inside me for years and was now suddenly released. It was a victory celebration, a prisoner free of its prison. It was free, and I was free. I couldn't contain the sudden overwhelming feeling of elation that coursed through me.

But then the pain came, sudden and sharp, as if someone had thrown boiling water on me. The suffocating heat of a thousand furnaces enveloped me and the flames burned higher and brighter. Just when I thought I couldn't take it anymore, the pain and heat lessened. It was as if I were becoming used to it. When I looked at the skin on my arms and hands, I expected to see a charred mess as the flesh melted away from my bones—was this how witches burned at the stake felt?

The fire did not actually touch me. The flames hovered a fraction of an inch above my skin, surrounding me like a corona. I put my hands to my head, and felt my hair, thick and unburned. My face, my neck, my breasts; all unharmed.

The wonder of it struck me then: I was completely enveloped by fire, and I was still alive. I had to wonder if this was what my great-grandmother Beatrice had meant by embracing the flame. What did this mean? Was I a freak of nature who could create fire from nothing? Or was I possessed of this power? Was there meaning behind it?

Unlike the previous instances when I summoned the fire, I did not pass out, and as a matter of fact, felt quite alive and invigorated. Another problem existed: how to stop it.

I tried to will the fire to go away, as I had when Neil was there. The fire on the lake went out, but like a caged animal suddenly freed, the flames surrounding me did not want to return to its prison. I continued to burn like an eternal candle.

Panicking, I took a tentative step toward the lake and put my foot in the water. Where my skin sunk below the surface, the flames immediately dissipated. I put my other foot in, and now I was flame-free from the ankles down. As I walked in deeper and deeper, I sensed the fire recoil as the water extinguished it. Enraged, it burned brighter and hotter. Soon, I could feel the pain returning. It felt as if the flesh were melting from my body, though my skin remained unmarred.

Quickly, I moved forward until I was in up to my hips, then up to my shoulders.

I was in complete agony by the time I submerged myself fully in the lake.

It was only then that the fire finally left me.

\* \* \*

Sneaking back to my motel room stark naked proved more of a challenge than I had initially thought. Not only was I self-conscious of my exposed parts, but once I crested the rise of the hill that separated the lake from the motel, I realized I was in full view of any passersby driving on the highway. A nude woman running down a hill might prove enough of a distraction to a driver to cause an accident. The last thing I wanted was any more attention.

I pulled a shrub up from its roots and, holding it in front of me to hide my nakedness, I slunk down the hilltop until I reached the back of the motel. All the while, I felt a different kind of heat flush through my skin. If Uncle Edward happened to come around the corner and see me in this state...

I made it to the garbage bin unobserved, and timed it so that I raced down the length of the motel to my room without anyone seeing me.

Once inside my room, I shut the door and locked it. In the safety of the room, I finally let myself relax.

A realization came to me then: I didn't have control. At least, not the true kind of control I wanted. Yes, I had been able to summon the power several times, but there was no way I could throttle it, at least not like Neil could manipulate water. The one time I had made the fire stop it had only been through intense concentration, and right now I suspected that had been an illusion. The power had let me believe I could stop it.

This afternoon, the fire's true nature had been revealed: once the power was fully unleashed, it had refused to be harnessed. Only by submerging myself in water was I able to stop it.

This affliction was beyond me. I was at its mercy.

I stumbled into the bathtub to wash the dried grass and dirt off me, and by the time I was finished, I was far too exhausted—physically and emotionally—to think about it anymore. I don't even remember crawling between the sheets and falling asleep.

\* \* \*

I shot out of bed when I heard a loud knock. I threw my robe around my shoulders and dragged myself to answer the door.

Neil's smile slipped away when he saw my puffy eyes.

"What's wrong?"

"I—nothing. I'm sorry, I forgot about our lunch date. I don't think I'm up for it."

"Oh, don't worry about that. Are you all right?"

I looked down. "No."

He stood at the entrance, uncertain of his next move. His look of genuine concern made me relent. I stepped back and gestured for him to come in.

As promised, he had brought lunch with him, and put the paper bag from the Finer Diner on the dresser. Even though I was starving, the smell of hot beef sandwiches was not enough of a distraction to forget about what had happened earlier.

“You look tired,” Neil said.

I shot him a sour look. “Thanks for noticing.”

“Sorry.” Suddenly, he seemed very uncertain of himself, like a little lost puppy. He looked so sad, I had to apologize.

“No, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so sharp. I—”

But then I wasn’t so certain I wanted to share anything more with Neil. He had been nothing but supportive and kind. I didn’t deserve him.

“What?” he pressed.

“I’ve just got a lot of things to think about.” I bit my tongue, then decided to tell Neil. “I ran into Barry earlier today.”

He stiffened, his face darkening. “Did he hurt you?”

“No. He never even raised his voice.”

Neil pursed his lips. “I don’t understand.”

I sighed. “He said he just wanted to get back together with me.”

“Oh?” He looked away from me.

“Don’t worry,” I told him, waving my hand. “It’ll never happen.”

“All right, then—?”

“I was so angry at him. He thought he could just snap his fingers and get me back. I guess I needed to—I don’t know—unleash the fire. Just a little bit. Maybe let a little of it out so that it wouldn’t overpower me later. I went to the lake.”

Neil watched me expectantly as I rubbed my knuckles.

“The truth is I don’t have control,” I admitted. “I never did. It was an illusion, a trick. Any minute, it can just take over. I fooled myself into a false sense of security. I got arrogant, and that’s when the power put me in my place. I let it out and it completely took over. I couldn’t stop it. I had to go completely into the lake to put out the flames.”

I looked up at him.

“I don’t think I can stay here,” I said. “The power is far too unpredictable. Someone’s going to get hurt, or worse. It was a mistake to come home. The more I play with the fire, the more power it holds over me.”

He said, “That’s not true. You can control it. You just have to give it some time. At first, I felt the same as you. There were a few instances where I felt

powerless, but over time, I learned to harness it. You can learn that as well.”

I stared into his eyes with desperate hope. “Do you think so? I couldn’t handle it if someone else got hurt because of me. I could never forgive myself.”

“Trust me,” he said with such confidence that I felt myself believing him. Before I knew it, I slid inside his comforting embrace.

\* \* \*

Later, we opened the lunch bag and ate. I discovered I was enormously hungry, and finished my sandwich before Neil had taken two bites. I looked in the bag for more.

“Want mine?” he offered, holding out the other half of his sandwich.

“Uh, no,” I said, embarrassed by my appetite. “That’s all right.”

“Feeling any better?”

I brushed a strand of hair from my face. “I guess.”

A half smile played across his lips. “So, you had to crawl all the way down that hill buck naked?”

“Gawd, don’t remind me!” I had told him the full story while we ate. “If my uncle saw me, I think I would have died of embarrassment. He already thinks the worst of me.”

“He doesn’t.”

I shook my head. “I’m not his favorite person in the world.”

“Maybe, but you’re family, and I think that’s as important to him as it is to you.”

“You think so?” I asked.

“Yeah, I do.” He gave me a warm smile.

It was the exact right thing to say to make me feel better, and I smiled back at him.

My life was in complete turmoil, and I had no idea whether I should be in Middleton, or locked in some experimental lab in the city. At that moment, though, I felt safe and that there was true hope for me; and all I had to do was to believe in Neil’s words.

“So, what now?” I asked him.

“What do you mean?”

I said, “Say you’re right, and I eventually learn to control this power.”

“You will.”

“Right.” I motioned with my hand. “Then what? We’ve got this power. Fire and water. It’s been a part of my life so long. I don’t know what to call it other than a curse—at least, that’s how my great-grandmother thought of it. But it has

to be more than that. Why do I have it? Why do you have it? What do we do with it? I mean, you joined the fire department, and that's great, but was that really what you were meant to do with this *thing*?"

"I don't know," he admitted. "I just figured fighting fire was a natural extension of controlling water, I suppose. At least, it fills me with a sense of purpose. I guess you'll just have to figure out whether to use your gift for something, or suppress it like your great-grandmother did."

I leaned back against the wall. "I don't think I ever told you about that night, the first time the power came to me."

He replied, "I didn't want to press."

"Barry was never a great prize, but I was young and stupid. A rebel without a clue, if you know what I mean. He had a car, a couple of bucks in his pocket, and a pant load of confidence. I guess that translated to something attractive in my mind. Stupid kid.

"I was so deluded. I had no idea how the world worked. We got married right after graduation. Two idiots versus the world. But then the world hit back. Barry changed. No—not changed. He revealed himself. He got darker, meaner, more controlling. Things went downhill from the start, and it went sour in a hurry.

"He lost his job because of his temper, and we had to move in with my parents. That ate at him, like he wasn't a real man.

"By then, though, I was pregnant." I glanced up to measure Neil's reaction. To his credit, he did not say anything.

I said, "You mentioned the trigger was your brother dying. Well, I never told Barry about the baby, and he was crazy jealous most of the time. When he caught me with a pregnancy test, he assumed the worst and ... things got physical.

"I lost the baby that night, and then I lost control. The power, the curse, the ability—whatever it is—just took over. Our house burned to the ground. The walls melted. I can't remember much past that. I remember my parents screaming, and then I passed out."

Neil tentatively reached out a hand, but I pulled away.

"When I woke up," I said in conclusion, "I was on the front lawn. The house was in cinders. Barry had run straight to The Trough and shouted that I had started a fire and tried to burn him to death. His father had handcuffs on me before the paramedics finished checking me over."

Neil once again reached out for me, and though I pulled away, he didn't retreat. He grabbed me in his arms, and pulled me tight.

"I'm so sorry," he said, and rocked me while the tears flowed.

Through the remembered pain, I sobbed, "So, you tell me, what the hell kind

of purpose I have other than the destruction of everyone I love?”

Neil ran his hand along the skin of my cheek and made a shushing sound.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

**Somehow, I pulled** myself together and got ready for my shift manning the motel office. Neil offered to keep me company for the evening.

“I don’t have anything better to do,” he told me. But I thought keeping myself occupied with my daily duties and focusing on work would be the best therapy. I coaxed it out of him that Chief Hrzinski had invited him to spend the evening over at his place for dinner and to go over some work-related procedures, and I made him promise to go through with it.

“My head’s still swimming from all the paperwork this morning. I’m not sure I can take much more so soon,” he said. “Maybe I’ll just take a stroll around town, get my bearings.” With a smile, he left.

I was feeling sorry for myself, and while I was trying to figure out how to get anything other than sludge out of the office coffee machine, I heard the door open.

“Beth! What are you doing here?” I said with a sudden smile.

“Sorry I didn’t stop by yesterday to see how you were. John’s parents invited us over for Sunday dinner. I heard about Sheriff Burke. He was born an ass.”

“Yeah, but Uncle Edward gave him what for.”

“I know.” She laughed. “John howled when he found out. Ever since the sheriff gave him a parking ticket when he was idling outside the Fast & Friendly waiting for me to pick up diapers, he’s had a hate-on for our local constabulary.”

“Sounds like Sheriff Burke.” I smirked and shook my head. “You just doing a drive-by?”

“Yeah. Left John Jr. with John; I need some time without anyone screaming at me. Thought I’d drop by and see how my best girl is doing.”

“I’m all right.”

She looked concerned. “You don’t sound all right.”

“It’s tough, but I think I can get through it.”

“Good for you,” she said with a wink. “I’d hate for you to cut bait only a week in.”

I glanced up at Beth, wondering if she suspected that I had been about to do just that last Saturday night.

“You know me,” I told her, “stubborn as a mule.”

“Got that right.” She laughed. “Listen, I’m off to spin class, so I gotta book, but what I really wanted was to find out if you’ve got plans for tomorrow.”

I thought about Neil. When we parted, we never set anything in stone. “No, nothing really.”

“Great. We need to get shopping, girl. You look like you just stepped out of the last century. My mother’s taking the baby for the day. How about we head out to Scottsdale tomorrow and hit some of the malls?”

“I don’t know.”

“If we leave early enough, we’ll have time to have lunch there and we’ll be back before the start of your shift. Unless you’re too old to boogie all day and work all night.”

“Ass,” I told her, but I was smiling. “All right, fine. Sounds like a date.” Besides, my wardrobe had been cut down by the afternoon’s misadventures. Retail therapy might just be the answer to my woes.

\* \* \*

Anytime I left town, I had to check in with the sheriff’s office. Early the next morning I went in to report my travel plans, and luck was on my side. Sheriff Burke was out at the McGregor Ranch hunting down a pack of coyotes that had killed two cattle the other night. Maisy Bell took down my information and Beth’s cell phone number and told me to have a fantastic day.

And I did.

\* \* \*

When I came back later that afternoon, Neil was waiting in the office with Uncle Edward. He was sitting on a guest chair while my uncle shuffled some paperwork. It looked as if they were chatting about nothing in particular—just two guys talking about the weather, or sports, or whatever men talk about.

My heart skipped a beat and my stomach clenched at the same time. We hadn’t had an official date today, but I hadn’t bothered to even leave a note for him. Neil smiled when I stepped into the office, but I could see a touch of hurt in his eyes.

“Have fun?” he asked.

“It was good to get away for a bit,” I admitted. “And I’m back in time for my shift.” A quick glance toward Uncle Edward revealed nothing. He merely grunted and went back to tallying the day’s receipts.

I noticed the remains of lunch on the chair beside Neil—a half-eaten sandwich

still in the wrapper.

“Oh, I must have forgotten about us today,” I said.

“Not at all. I don’t think we mentioned anything. But if you’re hungry...”

“I ate already, sorry.”

“No problems. Listen, I was just waiting around to let you know I have to head back to Denver tomorrow.”

“What?”

“Yeah. There’re some loose-ends I have to tie up—cancel my lease, that kind of stuff.”

“Oh. Are you going to be away long?”

“Couple days at the most. I should be back by the weekend.”

“Oh,” I said again. In a way, I was more than a little disappointed. A day away from Middleton had given me time to get some perspective on my life; and on the trip back, as Beth nattered on endlessly about John Jr. and how much she missed him even after only a few hours, I realized that I also missed those I had left behind: Aunt Martha, Uncle Edward ... and Neil.

No matter how confused my feelings were about him, and whether he even thought of me as anything other than a friend, I knew deep down that I wanted him in my life.

I asked, “What time are you going? I’ll get up and have coffee with you before you go.”

He shook his head. “No need. I’ll be up pretty early.”

“It’s no problem, really. I want to get up with you.”

“You sure?” he asked, his face lighting up.

Uncle Edward, annoyed by our prattling, cleared his throat and shot me a hairy eyeball.

I smiled at Neil. “Yeah. I’ll set my alarm right now. But I better get ready for my shift.”

Neil winked at me before he left, and I could feel my face flush when Uncle Edward harrumphed at me.

\* \* \*

Once my afternoon duties were finished, I headed into the back office to use the microwave. Aunt Martha had left me a plate of spaghetti wrapped in plastic. I cooked it too long, and it was steaming hot. My stomach rumbled as I watched it cool.

When I took my first bite, the front door chimed. Wiping my mouth with a paper napkin, I hurried to the front office, a curse on my lips. I was surprised to

see both Aunt Martha and Uncle Edward standing there.

"Evening, Darcy," Aunt Martha said, her tone sounding unusually formal. "My, you certainly have cleaned this place up and organized it."

"Wasn't so bad before," Uncle Edward began to protest, but shut his mouth when his wife shot him a dirty look.

"Thank you," was all I could think to say.

"No," Aunt Martha said. "I want to thank you for all the help you've given us this past week."

I blushed. "I'm just glad to have a place to call home."

"Oh, pish-posh. Anyway, I think you deserve an extra night off, at least a few hours extra. Your uncle and I are used to trading shifts, so what's one more evening, hey?"

"I don't know what to say." I looked back and forth between the two. "Thank you. But really, it's no problem. I'm glad you two have more time for each other now." I saw Uncle Edward's frown at that last statement, but politely ignored it.

"Here," said Aunt Martha, "let me take over for the rest of the night."

"Aunt Martha, I couldn't, really."

But she had already maneuvered her way behind the counter and pushed me out.

She added, "Before you go, your uncle has something he'd like to say to you."

Uncle Edward and I stood a few paces apart, like gunslingers waiting for the other to flinch. Then he finally cleared his throat and spoke in a rasp. "Yeah. Uhm, I think you're fitting in here real nice."

That was all? "Oh, no problem," I said. "I'm just happy to—"

He frowned. "Shut up a minute and let me finish, would you?"

"Shutting up, sir."

Avoiding the daggers Aunt Martha shot at him with her eyes, Uncle Edward dropped his voice again and said what he had to say:

"Well, your aunt thinks we should offer you a stake in the business."

That took me by surprise. "A stake? You mean—?"

"Just a small bit to start with," he added. "You know, so you have some ownership."

"A ... partnership?"

"Junior partnership," he corrected me.

Aunt Martha harrumphed, and Uncle Edward nodded to her. "Yes, yes," he said, and waved his hand at her.

He turned to me. "We're no spring chickens. And this is a young man's game—er, woman's. Whatever. I mean to say, we'll start slow and, maybe, over time, you can build your stake in the motel until one day..." He glanced up at me.

“We’d like to retire one day. You know.”

I put my hands together. “Oh, Aunt Martha! Uncle Edward! I don’t know what to say. I couldn’t possibly take the motel away from you!”

“I won’t hear another word,” Aunt Martha said. “We’ve made up our minds. Tomorrow, we’ll go down to Jenkins Law Office and make you the beneficiary on our insurance policy for starters.”

Overwhelmed by the gesture, I went around the counter to give Aunt Martha a fierce hug. When I finally released her and tried to hug Uncle Edward, he dodged my awkward attempt and instead held out his hand.

We shook to being future partners, and for the first time in ten years, I knew deep in my heart I was home.

Against his feeble protest, I hugged Uncle Edward anyway.

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

**I could barely** contain myself. After Aunt Martha shooed me out of the office, I practically flounced down the walkway along the row of doors until I reached Neil's room and knocked. It was early, and I figured he would still be awake.

"Neil? You there?"

There was no reply, so I tried to peek through the windows, but the room was black. Maybe he'd gone out.

My joy ebbed more than a notch. What good was happy news if you didn't have someone to share it with? I knocked again, this time with more urgency.

"Neil?"

Once more I knocked, and when I didn't get a response, I tried the door handle. It was unlocked. I swung the door wide open. The room was pitch black.

I stepped inside and flicked on the light.

No one was there.

Disappointed, I took a step back out of the room, but something blocked my exit. Startled, I let out a little yelp and turned around.

Neil stood there, a big grin on his face. In his hand he held a bouquet of half a dozen roses.

"You scared the life out of me!" I told him, eyeing the flowers.

He laughed. "Sorry about that. I just stepped out to get these for you."

"For me?" I could barely breathe out the question. "What for?"

He gestured to the inside of the room. "Mind if I come in?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah. It's your room. Of course." We went in and he closed the door. I took the flowers when he offered them to me and smelled them.

"They're wonderful. Thank you."

"Your aunt mentioned that you might have the evening off, if I wanted to spend some time with you. I thought we might go out to a late dinner or something. Just us."

I gave him an uncertain glance. "I don't know what to say. I thought—"

"Thought what?"

"Maybe you didn't want to be—I mean—with me."

A troubled look settled over his features. "I'm really sorry if I've been acting

like an ass.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far, but you have been getting more and more distant the last day or so. I thought we’d made a connection on Sunday, and more than just through the power.”

He stood up. “It’s because of the power that I’m so distracted. It’s not you.”

“Oh?” I sat on the edge of the bed while Neil paced, searching for the words.

“I told you about this intuition which I’ve slowly developed over the past few years?”

I said, “Yeah.”

“Well, yesterday I got one of those ... feelings. It wasn’t a good one. My gut cramped and I thought I was going to throw up.”

I asked, “Does that happen every time?”

“No. For example, when I heard about the job here in Middleton, there was a kind of tugging sensation low in my chest. It’s usually more subtle; like when I’m playing cards I get a tingling on my neck behind my ears when I should bluff, a tightening in my throat when I should fold.”

I asked, “So what does being sick to your stomach mean?”

“Nothing good,” he said, his voice low with foreboding. “I’ve never been that violently ill before. I don’t know, maybe something very bad is going to happen. I mean, there’s got to be a reason we have this power; you’ve asked me this exact question.”

I nodded. “We can find out together.”

He flashed me a smile, but I could tell he was still very concerned. “I would love that,” he admitted. “But what is bothering me is that whatever it is that’s supposed to happen might come faster than we realize.”

He let out a hollow laugh. “Listen to me, carrying on like some old soothsayer. Next thing you know, I’ll be reading fortunes in tea leaves.”

I laughed politely, but I didn’t find his joke very comforting. There had been enough adversity in my life. I just wanted to live as a normal person. Power? Curse? Gift? Whatever it was, I would trade it in a heartbeat if I could go back in time and erase all the heartache and pain. If Neil’s intuition was to be trusted, if there was something dreadful on the horizon, I wasn’t sure I wanted to face it.

Neil sat down beside me on the bed and put one arm around me. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. Maybe it’s really just nothing. You know ... a false alarm. Maybe those eggs I had for breakfast yesterday just didn’t agree with me.”

I looked up at him. “Yeah, maybe.” But I knew, somewhere deep inside me, that his initial gut instinct was probably right. There was some reason that we had these powers, and I knew I wasn’t ready for it ... whatever it was.

“Hey, listen. Whatever happens, I want you to know that I plan on sticking around,” he said.

“Really?”

Neil nodded. “Of course. It feels right, being here. Like I belong.”

“With me?” I asked slowly, tentatively. Hopefully.

He looked into my eyes and nodded. “Yes.” Then, as if confirming it again for himself, he repeated, “Yes,” and held me tighter.

“I wasn’t sure you felt anything like that for me,” I admitted, putting my hand on his chest.

Gently, he put his hand on top of mine. “What gave you that idea?”

“Well, at the lake the other day, when I kissed you...”

With a sheepish grin, he cast his eyes down. “Oh, that. I have a confession to make, I guess.”

I pulled back. “What?”

“Well, it’s been a long time.” He looked away, as if he didn’t want to meet my eyes. “A really long time, if you know what I mean, and I didn’t want to ... you know, rush into anything.”

When he looked back up at me, he had a hopeful look on his face, as if wanting me to understand him. I did.

He said, “I just got a little self-conscious about everything. I didn’t want you to think I was *that* kind of guy.” He squeezed my hand, as if I would run away from him if he didn’t hold on tight enough.

After a moment, he said, “I like you, Darcy.”

My heart fluttered. “You do?”

It was more than I had hoped for. I almost couldn’t believe the words coming out of his mouth.

“Of course I do. A lot. I’d be crazy not to. You’re beautiful, smart, kind—”

I was so overjoyed to hear him say it, that I didn’t wait for him to finish. I grabbed the side of his face with my hand and pulled him closer.

We kissed, and I felt an electric thrill run up my spine. The desire I’d felt for him over the past few days was nearly overpowering, and I could sense him reacting to that.

“Why don’t we just skip dinner and stay in tonight,” I suggested to him as I ran my hand down his muscular back through his shirt. It had also been a very long time for me, and I felt dizzy with need.

“Yeah,” he said, tugging my shirt up out of my jeans.

Like two love-struck teenagers, we fumbled at each other’s clothes and fell to the bed together.

I had always been faithful to Barry, even through the periods where we had



broken up. Never having anything to compare with, I never understood until that night what lovemaking really was.

I gasped at first contact, and bit my lip against the brief discomfort. Soon though, as we moved in tandem, I could feel the tide of passion rising within me.

I held out as long as I could, but when I felt his urgency and his movements become quicker and more intense, I rocked against him harder and harder. My eyes rolled back in my head and my fingers dug into the skin of his back when the sudden wave of release hit me. I cried out and sucked in my breath as Neil's rhythm also reached its peak.

He shuddered and then collapsed on top of me, and we lay there together for an unimaginable length of time, both of us completely spent and drunk on the afterglow.

\* \* \*

At first, I thought it was simply an effect of the physical intensity between me and Neil, but the growing heat in the room was not the result of our intimacy.

I opened one eye and cried out when I saw the window of the room behind the curtain brighten, as if the sun had risen and was beating down.

"What?" Neil asked sleepily when I shook him by the shoulder.

"Look!"

Neil turned his head toward the window, and immediately sprung out of bed, grabbing his jeans.

"What's going on?" I asked. I was still disoriented and my mind just wouldn't make the connection.

"Get dressed," Neil ordered. "Fire."

"Fire?" For a moment, I couldn't breathe. *Fire?* A thought hit me: was it me? The power in me emerged whenever I experienced extreme anger or fear, or when my life was in danger. What if the opposite emotion had sparked the curse and, when I had come, I had released some of the power and inadvertently set the motel on fire? I would never be able to forgive myself.

Neil's training kicked in and he didn't hesitate for a moment. He raced to the door and checked it with his hand. I could tell from the grimace on his face that the fire was right there, too hot to risk opening it. He darted to the window and drew back the curtains. Our entire view was filled with flames and smoke.

Something snapped me out of my paralysis and I yanked my clothes on. I went to the phone on the dresser and held the receiver to my ear. No dial tone. Frantically, I smacked the cradle a few times, but the line was dead.

The light in the room grew brighter and the glass on the window cracked as

the wooden awning running along the walkway outside the rooms caught fire.

“Can you put it out?” I yelled, even though he was only a few steps away. “Maybe run the water from the bathroom and direct it out there?”

Neil measured the distance. “I don’t think there would be enough pressure even from both the tub and the sink. We need to get outside. There’s a hydrant on the other side of the parking lot. If I can get to that, maybe I can do something.”

He stepped toward the front door again, but it cracked and flames licked through the gap.

“The bathroom window,” I said, and we both raced out of the main room.

I was the first one to the small window above the toilet. I threw my weight against it but it wouldn’t budge.

“What?” I cried in exasperation, but then Neil spotted the problem immediately. He set his jaw and pointed.

There was a screwdriver wedged between the window and the sill.

Two realizations struck me in quick succession: first, I hadn’t been the one to start the fire; second, someone else had. It wasn’t an accident. Someone had intentionally set fire to the motel and tried to trap us so we would burn to death in the blaze.

“Can we break the glass?” I suggested. “Maybe I can wiggle through.”

Neil wrapped a towel around his hand and, after making sure I was back far enough, smashed the window.

Once he had knocked as many glass shards out of the sill as he could, he helped me stand on the toilet seat. I stuck my head out of the window, but my shoulders scraped against a splinter of glass and I yelped.

“You won’t fit,” Neil said needlessly.

I tried a different tactic, and extended one arm out first, to make myself smaller, but I couldn’t get my torso through the opening.

“Argh!” I yelled in frustration, and pulled back. Before I got all the way inside, I saw movement across the field, no more than fifty feet away. Car lights on the highway flashed over the silhouetted figure and for a moment, I saw his face.

It was Frank! He threw an arm up in a feeble attempt to hide his identity, and scrambled off into the night. I knew if Frank was involved, that if he had been the one to jam the window, then Barry and Troy had to be near. Was Barry truly that crazed that he wanted to see me dead? Was this his warped sense of justice, to burn me to death as he imagined I had tried to do to him years ago?

I was so enraged when I extracted myself from the window, I didn’t even notice that I was bleeding from half a dozen cuts on my shoulders and chest until

Neil asked me if I was all right.

“No,” I said. “I’m not.”

As if sensing that my anger had nothing to do with my physical wounds, he glanced around, searching for ideas. “Listen,” he said. “I think I hear sirens. They should be on site within minutes. We just need to hold out until then—”

The front window exploded and the roar of the fire intensified as it found new territory to explore. Flames danced up the wall and blackened the ceiling.

“We won’t last a few minutes,” I said. “We need to get outside.”

An idea came to me, and I stood as close to the inferno as I could without my clothes setting on fire. The heat was suffocating. I held my breath, centered myself, and tried to relax.

“What are you doing?” Neil demanded.

“Fighting fire with fire.”

“We’ll be burned alive!” he argued.

“No. I can’t be burned.” But then I realized that even if I sent a wave of fire outwards, there was a good chance Neil would be caught in the blast.

I took a step back and coiled myself like a spring.

“Darcy?” he asked in a strained voice.

“If I can’t blast the fire out, then I’m going through the door. It’s half incinerated already; I’ll run through first and then you follow.”

“All right. Wait,” Neil said, and ripped the blankets off the bed. He raced back into the bathroom and ran the shower. After throwing the blankets in to get them soaked, he pulled one of them out, heavy and sopping, and thrust it at me.

He said. “Wrap this around you.”

“No.” I shook my head. “It’ll just trip me up. You use them.”

He didn’t argue, and threw the blanket around his shoulders and over his head.

We stepped back into the main room. “Are you ready?” I asked, and he nodded.

“Right behind you.”

Facing the flames, I prepared myself. I might have been immune to the burning of fire, but I was pretty sure I could break an arm if I hit the remains of the door the wrong way.

I took a deep breath. *You can do this*, I told myself, and charged.

Before I hit it, my instinct kicked in, and without having to get myself in the mindset, I summoned the power and used it to blast a small wave of fire at the door, which completely disintegrated in a shower of splinters and sparks.

I overbalanced as I ran through and fell to the pavement in the parking lot. A sopping wet mass hit me and completely smothered me—Neil. My shirt had caught fire and he was trying to put out the flames.

“You all right?” he asked when the fire was out, and helped me to my feet. He looked unharmed.

“Yeah.” I glanced down at myself. There were holes in my shirt and jeans, and I was a sooty mess. Otherwise, I was unharmed.

I was aware of a fire truck pulling up. A half a dozen men in yellow suits jumped out and burst into a flurry of activity.

The entire central section of the motel was on fire, from the front awning right up to the roof. Guests had poured out of their rooms, most of them disheveled and panicked.

I heard one guest ask if everyone had gotten out, and another answer that they thought so, but my immediate concern was for Aunt Martha who had been manning the office—as far as I knew. I looked around the crowd of people gathered in the parking lot and didn’t see her.

Neil saw the look on my face and narrowed his eyebrows in question.

“Aunt Martha!” I called out, and sprinted in the direction of the office, but Neil stopped me by grabbing my arm.

“Darcy.”

“What?” I said.

He pointed a few doors down from the office, halfway to where the blaze was the worst. Someone was huddled against the wall, and I changed direction. Together, Neil and I raced over, and as I got closer, I realized there were actually two people there, not one.

Uncle Edward was sitting with his back against the wall. Aunt Martha was laying flat, her head in his lap.

I had never seen Uncle Edward cry, but now he was sobbing.

When I got to them, I dropped to my knees. He looked up at me, his eyes tearing up.

“Aunt Martha?” I asked. And then I looked more carefully. Her face was smeared with ash and soot, and her mouth was pulled back in a fixed grin; she wasn’t breathing, and she wasn’t moving.

I put my hands to my mouth. “Oh, my God, no.”

I felt a warm hand gently touching my face and was surprised to see Uncle Edward looking intently into my eyes. “Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes, I’m fine.” I couldn’t find the words. “Uncle Edward!” Tears welled up in my eyes. “What happened?”

My uncle stroked his wife’s hair. “Martha,” he said to her lifeless form, “why won’t you wake up?”

I saw a spent fire extinguisher a few feet away. Aunt Martha must have tried to put out the flames and got too close. The heat and smoke must have overcome

her.

She had died trying to save my life.

Through my tears, I could barely see the medics who arrived to carry her off on a stretcher. One of them tried to check over Uncle Edward, but he pushed them away.

I reached out for him, but he stood up before I could put my hands on his shoulders.

“I have to be with her,” he said, and followed his wife into the ambulance.

\* \* \*

The night had become a miserable blur, and I can remember sobbing into Neil’s shirt. At one point, Sheriff Burke arrived and circled like a wolf coming in for the kill.

“She was with me all night,” Neil growled at him before he could begin his barrage of accusations.

“It was Barry,” I said, though my face was still buried in Neil’s shoulder.

The sheriff didn’t back down. “Bullshit it was Barry. Did you see him?”

Neil, as surprised at the accusation as Sheriff Burke, looked at me for confirmation.

“No,” I admitted, my teeth clenched.

With a look of distaste, the sheriff said, “More lies, then. You blame him for everything. I have half a mind to arrest you here on the spot and let the courts figure it out.”

Neil pulled me away. “You’ll do no such thing.”

The sheriff glared at us, but then headed off to assist the remaining guests and take statements.

When we were alone, Neil asked, “Was it him? Barry?”

“I can’t prove it, but I know it was.” I held his gaze, and he nodded that he believed me.

Someone shouted over at us. It was Chief Hrzinski; they needed Neil’s help.

“Go,” I said. “I’ll see if I can help the medics.”

Neil looked intently into my eyes, and then with a nod he raced off to fight the blaze.

Numbly, I headed toward one of the ambulances, to see if there was anything I could do, but all I kept thinking was, my aunt was dead. I kept losing everyone I cared about.

It was at that point the tears began to flow.

\* \* \*

Despite the efforts of Neil and the Middleton Fire Department, the Lazy Z Motel was nothing more than ashes and rubble when dawn broke the next day.

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

**The next day** I stood at the kitchen window in Beth's house looking out into her backyard. John had put John Jr. in a swing and was gently pushing him back and forth. The baby giggled with delight with every change of direction.

Behind me, Beth was chattering away about how difficult it was to find time to clean the house properly. Mostly, I think she was talking just to fill the silence. I wasn't in the mood for conversation, but politely listened.

Upstairs in their guest room, Uncle Edward was still asleep. When the reality of his loss had finally hit Uncle Edward at the hospital, he had become angry and yelled at the nurse until they gave him a shot to calm his nerves. He had gone to sleep as soon as we got to Beth's, and hadn't stirred since.

Someone bumped my arm and I turned to see a hot cup of coffee held out for me.

"Thanks, Beth," I murmured, and accepted the drink. Gingerly, I took a sip. It tasted like ash.

"No problem. I just hope that cot was all right; you should have taken the bed."

"I didn't really sleep anyway."

I put the mug down on the counter as Neil came downstairs. His hair was still wet from the shower.

"Hey. You going to be all right?" he asked.

I drew my lips tight. "It's just not right."

"I know." He spoke in a soothing tone, but I wasn't going to be mollified.

I said, "She never hurt anyone in her life. She didn't deserve this."

"Everyone liked her," Beth offered and put a hand on my arm. To Neil, she asked, "How's Edward? Did you look in on him?"

"He's awake, but he didn't say anything when I asked if there was anything I could do. Just stared at the wall."

I punched my hand on the counter, and the cup of coffee jumped.

Neil looked at me. "Darcy, I—"

"I know."

"I'm so sorry." He glanced at Beth. "I have to get down to the fire hall."

There's an investigator coming up from Phoenix, and I want to be sure he's got the straight story."

Beth nodded. "You go. I'll stay with Darcy."

I wanted to protest that I wasn't a child; I didn't need to be babysat. But I kept my mouth shut.

"Back in a few hours," Neil said to me, and gently touched my shoulder. He moved closer as if to kiss my cheek, but then changed his mind and stood beside me, at a loss for what to do.

"You go ahead. I'll be all right here," I replied.

He took a step away, but before he left, I reached out and grabbed his arm. I said, "Thank you." I gave him a kiss and hugged him tight. I could feel him relax.

I whispered in his ear, "Hurry back."

\* \* \*

Upstairs, I opened the door a crack and peered in. As Neil had said, Uncle Edward was lying in the spare bed on top of the covers and staring across the room at the wall.

"Uncle Edward?" I called over in a hushed voice. He didn't stir, so I took a step inside and closed the door behind me.

"Are you going to be all right?"

I padded over to the reclining chair beside the bed and perched on the edge of it. I reached out and touched the back of my fingers to his forehead, brushed a few strands of his gray hair out of his eyes.

If I hadn't been listening so hard, I wouldn't have heard his soft moaning. A tear trickled down his cheek.

I stood.

It wasn't right.

Something had to be done.

\* \* \*

"Darcy, you all right? Where you going?" Beth called out as I stormed down the stairs, grabbed my jeans jacket, and left without an explanation.

I didn't have time to get into a debate. My family was in ruins. First my mother and my father, then my aunt; and now my uncle was so far gone in his misery he might as well be catatonic.

All because of one person. I knew it deep in my heart and in my soul. Everything came down to Barry. I had spent half of my life suffering because of



him. Now, he had gone too far. In his jealousy, he had lashed out at me, but instead had killed my aunt.

But I needed proof. No one would take my word for it. I'd seen Frank in the headlights; but it was a good distance away and at night. Could I be so sure?

Yes I could, but proving it was another matter. How could I convince anyone in authority that Barry was behind the entire plot?

There was no way on earth I could get any confession or admission out of Barry by confronting him. He would just throw my words back at me, dodge the truth, and twist the accusation around to make it look like it was my fault. After all, I was the one with a criminal record. With his father protecting him every step of the way, I needed something more before I could prove my case.

Frank was almost as bad as Barry; he had a mean streak a mile wide, and it hadn't surprised me one bit that he had jammed our bathroom window closed and trapped us inside a burning building. I don't think Frank ever had a conscience.

Back when I was married to Barry, Frank had gotten into a bar fight with a bouncer in Sedona and smashed an empty beer bottle against the other man's face. The glass shards had embedded in the bouncer's eye and he lost his sight. Barry and Frank got out of there before anyone could identify them, and no police officer ever came around Middleton asking questions. When we found out what had happened with the bouncer, Barry had been quiet and wouldn't talk about it, but Frank laughed and said the guy got what he deserved.

Towards the end of our marriage, Barry had become more and more like Frank in his outlook on life and his disregard for his fellow man.

To pursue Frank or Barry would be a fruitless effort. My only chance was singling out the odd man in their twisted trio.

Troy was a weasel. If he had a backbone, it was made of rubber. So long as he didn't have Barry or Frank to back him up, I was sure I could coax the truth out of him. I had no idea if he had been involved, but if he hadn't been there last night, he knew what went down. Maybe that would be enough to force Sheriff Burke to launch an official investigation and put his son behind bars. As sheriff, he could only turn a blind eye so long. If the sheriff wouldn't hear me, then I would report it all to the state police.

And so I marched to Derring & Sons hardware store that morning.

\* \* \*

When I arrived, I was startled to see old Tom Derring sitting behind the counter. The smile fell from his wrinkled face when he saw me.

“Darcy, I heard about your aunt, I’m so sorry.”

“Where’s Troy?” I said.

“Uh, he’s out in the storage yard, stacking lumber, I think.”

Without thanking him, I left Mr. Derring scratching his balding head and marched straight through the back of the store and out into the fenced area.

I spotted Troy working a forklift, and changed direction to intercept him. He saw me coming, and for a moment I thought he was going to bolt. Then, he steeled his nerve and shut off his vehicle. Looking at me askance from the seat, he forced out a weak smile.

“Hey, Darcy.”

“Troy,” I said. “We need to talk about last night.”

“Oh, yeah, I heard something about that. You had a fire there, didn’t you?” My first impression was that he spoke softly out of sympathy or guilt, but I had never known Troy to be remorseful in his life.

“Don’t play stupid with me, Troy. I know Barry and Frank were behind it. The only question is: are you going to go down with them? Or are you going to confess and make a statement to Sheriff Burke?”

I could see the skin on his cheeks pale, and his eyes widen as he struggled to come up with an excuse or a lie. Sweat beaded on his forehead, but whether it was from the Arizona heat or from guilt, I could only guess.

“Well?” I pushed him. “Are you going to tell me what happened? And don’t say you don’t know.”

He jumped down from the forklift and pulled his work gloves off. When he’d been in the vehicle, I’d only seen one side of his face. Now, I saw a large bruise covering the left half of his jaw; his eye was swollen near shut.

A sore mouth was the reason for his soft speech, not any possible feelings of regret.

When his rat-like eyes glanced toward the exit, I sidestepped and blocked him before he could make up his mind to run. “You spill it, Troy.”

“All right, look. You gotta know,” he said, “it wasn’t me. I didn’t want any part of it. As a matter of fact, I don’t think me and Barry is friends anymore. No way am I gonna cross him, though.”

I wasn’t going to leave without something, and I think he sensed that.

“Fine,” he said finally. “I’ll tell you what happened. But you didn’t hear it from me, understand?”

“Get on with it,” I growled.

“I don’t know. Maybe I was pushing too hard, teasing him about how you basically crushed him the other day. He left the store without a word, but he was in a dark place, you know.

“Last night I got a call to meet him and Frank at The Trough. I figured we were just going to throw back a few bottles after work, like we do a couple times a week. So I said, yeah sure, why not?”

“When I got there, though, they were standing beside Frank’s pickup. In the back were two gas cans. Frank was smiling. His face has been peeling all week, and now it’s so pink you’d think he was wearing paint or something.

“They both figured it was time to set things right.

“The plan was to wait on the other side of the highway behind that copse of trees. When you went to bed, they were going to set the motel on fire to teach you a lesson, maybe get you arrested again.

“Darcy,” he said when he saw the look of outrage on my face. “I swear, I told them I didn’t want any part of it. I asked what was he thinking? Told him there were other people in the motel.

“He said they’d have more than enough time to get away; he only cared about getting back at you.”

I clenched my jaw. “So why didn’t you call his father to stop him?”

Troy flushed. “I couldn’t. Not right away. I mean, Barry smacked me so hard I saw stars. Said I was coming whether I liked it or not.”

I put my hands on my hips. “So you were there!”

“Yes and no.” His eyes kept darting around, as if he were looking for an escape.

“Which is it?” I asked.

Troy took a deep breath. “We rode down to the motel in Frank’s pickup. He brought a six pack and was already working on his second beer. He kept saying, ‘Look what that bitch’s boyfriend did to my face,’ and ‘Going to get some payback tonight.’

“Barry didn’t talk much, but when we drove out into the field to wait, he laughed and said, ‘When you play with fire, you get burned.’ ”

My gut clenched. Knowing that someone wanted to do you harm was a horrible feeling; when that person was someone you were once married to, it was worse.

Troy continued the story. “We thought we were going to be out there for a few hours, but we saw you and that firefighter boyfriend of yours go into the room together. That’s when Barry lost it. He told Frank to make sure you and him didn’t get out, and to jam the windows in the back while he and I poured the gas on your front door. He wanted you dead, I could tell.”

I felt the anger within me grow. There was nothing more I wanted to do at that moment than release the power within me and make Troy suffer for his part in the fire.

He held up his hand as if sensing my rage. "I swear to you, Darcy, I didn't do nothing. The moment Frank and Barry got out of the truck I bolted and never looked back. Soon as I got back to The Trough, I called the fire department. I swear," he repeated.

"Troy," I said. "You're going to tell everything you just told me to Sheriff Burke."

He shook his head. "No way. Barry's insane. He'd kill me."

"I don't care. We're going to the sheriff's office right now."

Troy's eyes shifted back and forth, then he looked down and let out a deep sigh. For a split second, I thought he was going to give in, but before I knew it, he burst into action and shoved me out of his way. I fell to the gravel, the wind knocked out of me.

By the time I got back to my feet and ran after him, he was already out of the lumber yard and into his truck.

"Troy, you little weasel!" I screamed at him.

"It ain't worth me dying over," he called back as he hit the gas. I had to throw my hands up to protect my face from the rocks flying from underneath his spinning tires.

Within moments, he was gone from sight.

\* \* \*

Sheriff Burke sat in his office chair. He leaned back and folded his hands over his ample belly, his face drawn in a wide smile.

I slammed my hand down on his desk, and he jumped forward, the smile instantly vanishing.

"Now you just calm yourself down right now," he ordered, pointing a finger at me.

"I demand to know why you haven't arrested Barry yet," I said. "I don't care if he's your son; he tried to kill me, and instead killed my aunt. Or don't you remember her?"

"Don't sass me, little girl." He pointed a finger at me. "I knew Martha from before you were born, so don't you go spitting out accusations about how I do my job. I took statements from everyone there last night, and not a single one of them mentioned anything about Barry starting the fire."

I grabbed at my hair in frustration. "He's a murderer. He was there!"

"Says who? Troy Hartman?" Sheriff Burke picked up my report and scanned the page. "According to your statement, Troy never actually saw anyone start the fire. For all we know, he just made everything up to get back at Barry for

smacking him around. Or he just told you what you wanted to hear so you'd go away. Your statement is all hearsay; this piece of paper isn't worth spit."

"If you don't believe me, find Troy and take him in for questioning."

He glared at me. "What do you think this place is? We don't take people in for questioning on your say so."

"Damn it!" I yelled in frustration.

"Look, I'll talk to Troy next time I see him," the sheriff offered. "As part of standard procedure."

I huffed. "Next time you see him? He took off like a bat out of hell. He's probably halfway to New Mexico by now."

"Convenient," Sheriff Burke said.

"Why are you protecting Barry so much? If you think he's innocent, why not track down Troy and get his statement?"

"It's not Barry I'm protecting," he said to me. "I'm protecting the town."

"The town?" I was completely stunned. "From what?"

"From you!" He pointed an accusing finger at me, and I took a step back.

"Me? Why?"

Keeping his finger out, he ticked the end of it with the index finger of his other hand. "One, you are a convicted arsonist on parole." He extended and touched his second finger. "Two, I have statements from the other guests that make me think you might never have been in that fire."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "What?"

"Well, look at you. You say you walked through flames, yet here you are, not a mark on you. That long hair of yours isn't burned. There are no scars on your arms or hands. Did you happen to see Frank's face lately? And that was just a pot of hot coffee."

I struggled for a way to deflect his reasoning. "But Neil gave you his statement."

"Oh." He pressed his lips together. "And like I'm going to believe the man you're shacking up with will tell the truth."

I clenched my fists. There was nothing I could do or say to convince Sheriff Burke. His mind was made up and that was all there was to it.

Anger bubbled up inside me, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I could sense something inside me urging me to let it out. This time, I had to focus to keep myself calm and under control.

"I can't believe this," I said, echoing my earlier thoughts.

"Believe it. I'm looking into this, and if I find anything that leads me to believe you were behind that fire, I'm going to come down on you like a ton of bricks."

It was all I could do not to succumb to my frustration and anger. “You’re out of your mind.”

Like most bullies, Sheriff Burke could sense when he had the advantage, and he pressed his: “It’s simple, really. Your aunt and uncle are getting on in years. They can’t run the motel anymore. I’m sure their insurance is paid up, though. I’ll have to check on that.”

My eyes widened at his implication.

He said, “You’re their only living relative. Maybe they asked you to set the fire so they can claim the insurance money, or maybe you thought this up all on your own. Doesn’t make any difference. You burn the motel to the ground, but someone gets hurt and you got spotted. Now you have to point the blame somewhere else.”

Logically, everything he said was a possibility. Suddenly, I realized that not only was the sheriff stonewalling my accusation, but he was building a case against me. I felt like a rat trapped in a cage.

The thermostat on the wall edged up a few degrees.

In a court of law, it would be my word against several witnesses. I had a criminal record. A repeat offender, this time they wouldn’t send me up for negligence, they would send me up for murder one.

Beads of sweat appeared on Sheriff Burke’s forehead. He wiped at it with a handkerchief.

“You bastard,” I cursed. “I didn’t do this. You know it.”

Wisps of steam rose from the half-empty cup of coffee on his desk.

“I don’t know any such thing. You did this once before. Don’t deny it. You killed your father and your mother.”

I closed my eyes. I tried to remember the mantra, but I couldn’t. My mind wouldn’t let me.

“And now you’ve killed your aunt. Who else has to die before they put you away for good?”

The effort it took to retain control of myself made me shake.

“*My eyes can see,*” I whispered.

“What did you say?”

“*I am in control.*”

The power dissipated. But I had to strain with the effort to keep it in check.

I took a deep breath and realized there was no point in staying.

The only reason Sheriff Burke hadn’t slapped handcuffs on me yet was that he didn’t have enough evidence to back it up. The more I argued with him, the more incensed he might become. He might decide to throw me in a cell anyway, and if there was any chance for me to clear my name, I couldn’t do it locked away.

I willed myself to shut my mouth, and backed out of the office.

Sheriff Burke said, "Don't you leave town, little girl. I've got my eye on you."

A self-satisfied smile on his face, Sheriff Burke reached down to grab his coffee cup. It was so hot, though, it burned his fingers, and he jerked his hand away, knocking the scalding coffee over his paperwork.

I could hear his curses from all the way down the hall.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

**I had no** idea when Neil was going to be finished at the fire hall, and I didn't want to go back to Beth's house. She would ask too many questions. Then there was my uncle. I couldn't face him knowing there was nothing I could do to help him get justice for his wife. Aunt Martha was all he had, and she was the only person in the world who had ever 'gotten' him. It was like losing a limb for him; an essential part of who he was.

The more I thought about losing Aunt Martha, the more my own grief consumed me, and the angrier I became. I had always loved and admired her, but in the past week, she had become like a second mother to me.

That damned fire inside me had taken away nearly everyone I loved.

I had to work past my grief somehow. If I didn't do something about clearing my name soon, Sheriff Burke would pin the fire on me, and Barry would get away with murder.

I didn't know what to do or where to turn. When I happened to pass by the Finer Diner, I decided to duck in and grab a coffee.

\* \* \*

I sat in a booth by myself and stared out the window. My coffee had long since grown cold. A thousand ideas came and went in my head, but inevitably, my thoughts circled back to how hopeless my situation was.

Two women a few booths over were talking about the fire. I instinctively shrank down so I was hidden, and perked my ears up at the same time.

"It's a crying shame about what happened to Martha Johnson," one of them said.

Her friend tsked in agreement. "And that poor Edward; what's he going to do now that his home is burned down and there's no one to take care of him?"

The first one lowered her voice a notch, but I could still hear every word. "It's that Darcy Anderson, I tell you."

"Who?"

"Their niece. That girl what burned her parents up ten years back, you remember? They sent her up to that women's prison in Phoenix, but some



brilliant paper pusher let her out. I don't know why they didn't give her the needle then. Firebugs. Sick in the head. Can't cure them, you know."

"Shameful," her lunch companion agreed.

Ears burning, holding back tears, I stormed out of the diner.

\* \* \*

Sinking closer and closer into despair, I found myself heading back towards Beth's house. I couldn't think of any place else to go.

As I neared, I saw an ambulance out front, and immediately broke into a run.

When I got inside, two paramedics had Uncle Edward on a stretcher and were navigating him down the stairs.

Beth, eyes strained and tight from worry, threw her arms around me.

I asked, "What is it? Is he—?"

"No," she said. "He's alive, but he's had a heart attack. The paramedics said there was too much stress."

As they moved past me, I saw Uncle Edward. His face was drawn, his eyes closed. His breathing was raspy and strained beneath an oxygen mask.

"Is he going to be all right?" I asked.

The paramedic said, "He's stabilized for now. But we need to get him to the hospital."

Beth pulled me back to allow the paramedics through.

"Darcy," she said. "No one can say if he's going to be all right or not. Listen, let me grab my car keys and John Jr. and we'll ride to the hospital together. Let the doctors have a look at him."

But that wasn't where I wanted to go at that moment. "I'll meet you there later."

"Darcy?" she asked, her voice going up.

"I'm not going to let them get away with it." I marched out of the house and across the lawn towards down town.

"Darcy, don't!" Beth called, but her words may as well have fallen on deaf ears.

\* \* \*

More enterprising than I would have ever given him credit for, Frank had managed to scrape up enough money over the years to purchase a garage from Sam Ulenko when the old mechanic finally retired. He had renamed it Frank's Fix-It.

Frank was hunched over an engine, the hood open and a flood light shining on

the machinery within. In one hand he held a ratchet and was tightening something in the engine.

He must have heard my footsteps, but didn't look up from what he was working on when he said, "Should've come by earlier. We're booked solid today. Try again tomorrow."

I continued walking toward him.

With an annoyed look, Frank popped his head out from under the hood. The side of his face was still pink and raw.

"I told ya to take a hike—" he started to say, and then he saw me. I faced him, my fists clenched at my sides. I gritted my teeth so hard my jaw hurt.

"You really are a crazy bitch," he said, his voice even. "Coming here alone." He hefted the wrench in his burnt hand and smiled. He winced and shifted the tool to his other hand.

"What're you doing here?" he challenged. "Maybe you want to dance?"

He took a step toward me, and though my initial reaction was to flinch, I didn't break eye contact.

"Troy told me everything," I said. "I want you to turn yourself in and tell Sheriff Burke everything that happened. I'm sure he'll take your cooperation into consideration."

Frank gaped at me for a full ten seconds, and then burst into raucous laughter. "You've got to have a screw loose. What makes you think I'll roll over and squeal like that pig, Troy?"

I tried to keep my voice as calm as possible, to show no fear. "I've already made a statement to Sheriff Burke," I told him, and then added the lie: "And as soon as his deputies get back on duty, they're going to come over here and arrest you. So you better get ready to make a confession."

A cloud of uncertainty fell over Frank, and then he grew angry. "You little tattle tale. Can't keep your damned mouth shut?" He raised the wrench. "Well, I'm just going to have to shut it for you."

The power flared in me. It felt like a second skin coating my body, filling every pore. The rush of heat was like a furnace from within and I felt a surge of intense elation as I opened myself up to it.

And it was a thing, an entity. I could sense it; the more I interacted with it the more I could define it. It was a separate part of me, or the hidden half of me. It was a beast whose hunger was primal and horrible. I was its prison and its jailor.

It wanted me to let it free, but I reined it in. I was its master, and I could do with it as I pleased. I was in control, not it.

I raised my hands and fire sprang from my fingers. I let the flames dance there, and giggled as I felt the power of this thing flow through me.

Frank paused in mid-attack, his eyes wide with fear. I could feel the presence in me growing, bidding me to unleash its full fury on him.

At the lake, it had taken control, but this time I forced my will on it, and focused the elemental energy on the wrench. The metal of the tool glowed red and turned to liquid, covering Frank's hand.

He screamed and tried to throw the wrench from him, but the molten metal stuck to his skin. I smelled burning flesh as it fused to his hand.

I said, "Tell the truth, Frank, and I'll make it stop."

My entire body was vibrating with the effort to control the immense power that flooded through me. I bit my lip as I concentrated, and the metallic burst of blood on my tongue helped center me. I pulled the force back inside me. The fire dancing in my hands dwindled and finally disappeared.

Frank's eyes were crazed. I don't know if it was the pain of his liquefied hand, the shock of seeing me shoot flames out of my fingers, or the knowledge that a woman had effectively emasculated him, but I think he was beyond rational thought.

He roared, "I'm going to kill you," and charged at me.

Without consciously thinking about it, I sidestepped and, without thought, hit him with an instant wave of fire. It knocked him back into the car. His coveralls, smeared with grease and oil, lit up like a bonfire.

"No!" I screamed, when I realized what I had done.

Panicked, Frank ran for a large water basin at the back wall of the garage, but he tripped over one of the electric cords for his compressor and fell headlong into a barrel of waste oil. It soaked him. His entire body immediately turned into a screaming, writhing ball of flame.

To my horror, he somehow got to his feet and staggered toward me. I gasped and backed away. This was not what I had planned when I came here.

"No! No! No!" I yelled to myself, to the power inside me. "I am in control! Stop!"

I tried to gather my wits, to regain control, and use the power to reverse the fire, but I couldn't think.

Frank only made it a few steps before he collapsed in the center of the garage. Behind him, the waste oil barrels were still burning, and the flames spread to a greasy tarp covering an engine block. A can of primer nearby caught on fire, and soon the entire back of the shop became an inferno.

I backed out of the garage, knowing there was nothing I could do.

Now that I had caged the power once more, I grasped what I had done. I hadn't wanted this to happen, but once I let the power out, I had reveled in it. Though I had more control than ever before, the rage and fury of it had become a

part of me. I had used that combination of its anger and mine on Frank, and now he was dead because of me. No matter what my intentions, people got hurt, people got killed. Everywhere I went, destruction followed.

## Chapter Thirty

**I walked down** Main Street in a daze. What I'd just done felt like a dream, or a nightmare. I thought I was in control of the power, and though I had been able to summon it and dismiss it at will, I had succumbed to its nature. Fire was a destructive force, and when I had channeled that energy, I couldn't help but cause destruction.

Was that my purpose in life? I had the ability to destroy anything I chose, or to avenge myself on those who harmed me and mine. Was it time to finally surrender myself to what I was?

When I spotted The Trough, and Barry's Camaro parked outside, I knew I had to finish this, even if it was the end of me. I had to accept who and what I was. There was no use fighting it.

\* \* \*

Unaware of the horror I had unleashed on Frank, Barry sat at the bar, nursing a beer and picking at a bowl of peanuts while Jack Creel wiped a glass with a dish towel.

Jack spotted me and went still. The smile on his face vanished.

Barry, noticing Jack's reaction, tensed and very slowly turned his head toward me. He blinked, as if I were the last person in the world he expected to see, but then broke out in a harsh laugh. "You gotta be kidding me."

With one hand, he picked up what was left of his beer and drank it down with a long pull, then slammed the glass on the bar.

There must have been a few other patrons there, because I sensed a number of forms rushing past me to get outside.

"I don't want no trouble in here," Jack said in warning.

"No trouble," Barry said. "No trouble at all. It's just some people never learn, do they?" He hadn't noticed the tendrils of smoke curling up from my fingers.

I took one step toward him.

"Oh, this should be good," he chuckled as if sharing a joke with Jack. To me, he said, "I don't know what you think you're doing, Darcy, but you better turn that narrow little ass around before I spank it for you."

I raised my hands, fingers splayed.

He laughed. "Going to claw my eyes out? Is that the big plan?"

When the tips of my hands sparked fire, his eyes went wide.

"What the hell?" he cried and backed away.

"Exactly," was the only thing I said as I willed every ounce of power I could summon to come forth. I threw my hands forward, and a spear of fire shot straight out at Barry.

He dove for the floor as the flames impacted against the shelves of liquor behind the bar. Jack Creel yelped and ran for his life.

Barry's survival instinct must have kicked in, because he sprung to his feet more quickly than I thought he was capable of, and raced out the back, following the bartender. The liquor on the wall burst into a mass of fire and glass behind him.

I followed Barry out. My arms, from the tips of my fingers to my elbows, were engulfed in flame.

Outside, I saw Barry turn the corner around the building and race for his Camaro. I threw my hand out as if pitching a fastball, and a bolt of flame shot out. It missed Barry, but exploded against his car.

Winded and shaken, Barry slipped on the gravel as he tried to skid to a stop before colliding with the fiery door of his vehicle. He fell on the ground and could not get his feet under him.

I lifted my arms out at shoulder height and tilted my head back. In my thoughts, I willed that entity within me to come out and do what came natural. Flames erupted from my fingertips, and tendrils of smoke rose from my arms.

For the second time in my life, I was about to commit murder. The man to whom I had once been married lay on the ground in front of me, one pleading hand help up toward me as he begged for his life.

He cried, "No! Please don't! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

My heart turned to stone. He deserved to die for everything he had done. I wanted to be the one to kill him.

"No more," I said through clenched teeth and raised my arms higher in the air.

A fireball the size of tire grew above my head like a burning sun—

"Darcy! Stop!" The voice penetrated through my rage, and I faltered before delivering the killing blow.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Neil on the other side of the street. The horrified look on his face made me hesitate.

"What are you doing?" he called. "You can't do this!"

I could see the shock on his face; how appalled he was at my actions, and I felt a burning shame. The fireball above me faded as a trickle of tears spilled

down my cheeks.

“Don’t you understand?” I pleaded to Neil as he hurried across the street to me. “Barry won’t ever stop unless I stop him.”

“Not this way.” Neil stopped in front of me and grabbed me by the shoulders. “Don’t do this.”

I sensed, more than saw, Barry scramble to his feet and run off as fast as he could.

Someone down the street shouted a warning as, beside us, the Camaro’s gas tank blew, and the entire car burst into flame with an ear-shattering thump. Metal parts sailed high into the air and fell back to earth.

I fell into Neil’s protective embrace, shielding myself against the blast. He pulled me a safe distance away from the burning vehicle, and in a daze I looked back at the wreckage.

So much destruction!

“I’m so sorry,” I said to him. Now that the fire inside me was back in its cage, I was horrified at how I had changed when using it. I had been a different person.

“It’s all right.” He made a shushing sound, as if trying to soothe a baby.

“No it’s not,” I said. “I thought I could control it, but...”

I struggled for a way to explain how I felt. Whenever I used the fire, I became more like it and something less than human. Or more than human...

“It’s a part of me,” I said in a small voice. “It’s not a curse; it’s a thing, and it wants out. I can’t control it.”

A thought came to me. In her journal Beatrice had said there had been a great sin in humanity’s past: when angels had lain with humans. God had banished those angels from heaven. Did those who had fallen now want to punish mankind? Was there truth in it? Was this, in fact, one of those fallen angels? But why me? Why was it inside me? Was it punishing me? Neil put his hands on my shoulders. “It’s over now. It’s going to be all right.”

As if a dam had broken, the tears that had started as a trickle were now a torrent. “There’s something inside me, something primal and furious,” I said when my sobs lessened. “I can borrow its ability, but every time I do, it grows stronger and I grow weaker.”

A troubled look fell across his face as he realized what I had been saying. “It? What, you mean like ... it’s possessing you?”

“Yes,” I said, and then changed my mind. “No, it’s something different, something more than that. Can’t you feel it when you use the power? A presence inside you? A fallen angel.” I said the last in a whisper.

I looked up into his eyes, searching for reassurance that I wasn’t alone in this,

that he experienced the same thing.

"I never thought about it, but ... I guess yes, I feel a kind of separation," he said finally, eyes wide with revelation. "It's like I'm standing outside of myself when it happens."

I nodded. "Like we're being pushed out. They tempt us with the power, but it's a trick. I think—"

The scream of a siren cut off the rest, and I turned my head.

Racing down Main Street, Sheriff Burke's squad car skidded to a stop at the edge of the parking lot.

Barry, seeing his father from across the street, raced toward him and dove behind the police car.

Sheriff Burke jumped out of his vehicle. Keeping himself protected behind the open door, he drew out a rifle and pointed it at me. He put one eye to the sight.

"Darcy Anderson. You are under arrest. Get down on the ground with your hands behind your head right now!"

All along Main Street, people had stopped to watch in fascination. Cars pulled over and drivers and passengers stepped out to see what was happening.

"Shoot her!" Barry called from behind the police car. "Just shoot the bitch!"

"Shut up!" the sheriff snapped back. He kept his rifle pointed at me, however. "This is your last warning. Get down before I put you down."

Neil stepped between me and the line of fire.

"Don't shoot!" he yelled out.

I have no idea if Sheriff Burke misinterpreted the action, or if a nervous impulse made him do it. His rifle kicked and a split second later a devastating sound split the air. The crack of the rifle shot was the only thing I could hear, and the unexpected force of the sound stunned me.

"No!" I screamed when I saw a splotch of red blossom out of Neil's back and grow in an angry red stain.

Neil stood motionless for a moment, and then sank to his knees. He tipped backward. I dropped down and caught him as he fell into my lap.

He stared at a spot far off in the sky, and I realized he wasn't looking at anything in particular. Opening his mouth, he tried to speak, but a bubble of dark blood leaked out and streamed down the side of his face.

"Oh, my God!" I cried.

Neil managed to utter my name in a very weak voice. "Darcy. I feel ... it going away."

"What? Neil. Don't speak. Help is on the way."

"It knows I'm dying..." were the last words Neil spoke before he sucked in one last raspy breath and fell still.



I threw my head back and opened my mouth in a silent scream. I couldn't bear the grief that clawed at my heart. It suffocated me. I couldn't think. I became something primal, something that bore no resemblance to anything human. When my voice finally returned, I emitted the most terrible sound imaginable; it was an elemental shriek that lasted for what seemed like an eternity. When I finally stopped to take a breath, I gathered every ounce of the power I could. I wanted it to take me over. I wanted it to possess me.

Whatever it was inside me had won: I gave myself over to it completely. I surrendered to it; I embraced it.

The air around me shimmered with heat.

All the rage I had tried to contain welled up within me.

The gravel around us shook; steam rose from the ground beneath us.

The anger, the despair and the frustration of my existence came to a boiling point.

Fire, hot and deadly, surrounded me and the dead man I loved. Flames danced around us, and grew until we disappeared into a furnace of fury.

I heard panicked screams and shouts. Through the smoky haze, figures raced away as the bonfire around us grew larger and larger.

The asphalt on the road not twenty feet from us started to melt. Telephone poles burst into flame and power transformers exploded in a shower of sparks.

A deep rumbling sound filled the street as the darkness in me exploded outward like an incendiary bomb. Windows shattered and the gas tanks of nearby cars blew. Barry and his father raced for cover as the squad car detonated, hurtling the vehicle into the air and slamming it back to the street on its side with a thundering crash.

The final explosion of fire and rage completely incinerated The Trough, every car in a one block radius, and most of the shops on Main Street.

There was nothing left but a charred and blackened circle of ash smack in the centre of Middleton.

## Epilogue

**Four days after** the inferno that ripped a swath of destruction through Middleton, the town held two sets of funerals. Early in the morning, the charred remains of Barry and Martin Burke were buried in plain wood coffins. Father Tomas conducted the service. There were only four attendees: Maisy Bell, the mayor, the fire chief, and Jack Creel—who made it a point of going to every funeral in town.

Later that day, a much larger crowd, including Beth and John, gathered for a four-casket funeral. Two of the coffins held the bodies of Aunt Martha and Uncle Edward. He had never made it out of the hospital, suffering a second heart attack in the middle of the night from which he didn't recover.

Uncle Edward and Aunt Martha had many friends, and it was mostly for them the attendees came.

The third casket was for Neil. His parents, when notified of their son's demise, flew in from Maine just for the day; they were booked on an overnight flight back, and were not happy about paying their share of the funeral expenses.

Father Tomas again oversaw the service. He recited the prayers and motioned for one of the pall bearers to lower the four caskets one at a time.

The bearer pressed a control for the motorized pulley, and Aunt Martha's coffin slowly disappeared below ground. The priest made the sign of the cross.

"Unto Almighty God, we commend the soul of our sister, Martha Johnson, and we commit her body to the ground."

Next was for Uncle Edward:

"Unto Almighty God, we commend the soul of our brother, Edward Johnson, and we commit his body to the ground."

Jack Creel dropped his head and crossed himself.

The priest then proceeded to the third casket.

"Unto Almighty God, we commend the soul of our brother, Neil Dawson, and we commit his body to the ground."

Father Tomas came to the last casket and paused. The coffin was empty. There had been no remains to bury. He recited his prayer anyway:

"Unto Almighty God, we commend the soul of our sister, Darcy Anderson,

and we commit her body to the ground.

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

In the front row, Beth clutched at John’s jacket and buried her face in his chest. Father Tomas prayed, “Grant this mercy, O Lord, we beseech Thee, to Thy servant departed, that he may not receive in punishment the requital of his deeds who in desire did keep Thy will, and as the true faith here united him to the company of the faithful, so may Thy mercy unite him above to the choirs of angels. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.”

“Amen,” was the muttered response from those in attendance.

“May his soul and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace,” Father Tomas said, and the mourners rose from their seats. In low tones, they offered sympathetic words to each other as they slowly dispersed.

Beth and John were the last to leave. She hung off his arm for support and rested her head on his shoulder as he guided her back to their car.

\* \* \*

When everyone had gone, and the cemetery was quiet at last, I stepped out from behind one of the storage sheds a distance away from where my loved ones were buried. I knew I was taking an awful chance of being seen, but I had to pay my last respects to the three people I had grown to love so deeply over the past few weeks.

At Aunt Martha’s headstone, I grabbed a handful of soft fresh dirt from a pile near the opening and tossed it in. The earth hit the wooden casket and I said, “Aunt Martha. I will miss you.” My tears fell to the ground and disappeared into the soil.

Stepping around to the next grave, I placed my hand on the cold headstone and said, “Uncle Edward. I know you can never forgive me for the death of my mother and your wife. If I had never come back, both you and Aunt Martha would still be alive. I’m so sorry.”

Steeling myself, I moved to the third grave and stood over Neil’s casket laying quiet and isolated.

“There is something inside people like us; that much I know. What I don’t know is what they want with us. You told me once that people like me and you were here for a reason. I don’t know what that purpose is, but I promise you that I won’t rest until I know the answer.”

I picked up another handful of earth with the intention of spreading it over his coffin, but the thought of saying goodbye was far too painful, and I let the dirt

fall through my fingers.

“You saved my life and they took yours. I love you,” I said and meant it.

Finally, I stood before the last grave.

My empty grave.

By all rights, I should have died many times over. But I was immune from fire, and I alone had survived that catastrophic day. But it was a rebirth for me, like a phoenix from the ashes.

I wanted to blame the thing inside me for the destruction, but the truth was, I had used it as much as it had used me. We shared in the responsibility. I was a murderess, and that was something I would have to try to live with, though my heart was so heavy I didn’t know if I could stand it.

Was it a fallen angel in me? I didn’t know enough about them. I would have to do much more research. Why had they fallen? What did it want with me, with us? Neil didn’t seem to have been at odds with the one inside him. Was mine different? Angrier? Did it want to co-exist with me, or take me over?

Either way, it would be a battle of wills.

\* \* \*

The next day, I was walking north along the highway, my thumb out. I was far enough away from Middleton that I wasn’t too worried about seeing anyone who might recognize me. A sky-blue pickup pulled over and an older man in a straw hat curled up on the sides grinned at me. He tipped his hat.

“Where you heading, Miss?” he asked through a mouth full of tobacco.

“Denver,” I said, hopeful that he was heading in that direction.

“That’s a long way to hitch, especially for a young pretty thing like you. What’s in Denver?”

“Uh, I might have a job there.”

Neil had spent years scouring newspapers and the internet looking for people like us. As far as I knew, all his research was still at his apartment in Colorado. That was as good a place as any to learn everything I could about what was happening to me.

The man nodded. “I can get you as far as Winslow, that’s a few miles east of Flagstaff. That all right by you?”

I smiled. “Perfect. Thank you.”

“All right, then. Get yourself on in.”

I had barely hopped into the passenger seat and put on my seat belt before he started chatting.

“Name’s Al. I got a ranch outside Prescott. Where you from?” The happy grin

never wavered from his face.

He drove the truck ten miles under the posted limit. This was going to be a long drive.

“Phoenix,” I said without missing a beat.

“Oh, yeah? Hot there this time of year, huh?”

“Hot there any time of the year,” I said with a polite smile.

“You got that right.” He turned his head to look at me. For the first time, his smile faded and he looked troubled. “You must have come up past Middleton,” he said. “You hear about that stuff that happened there a couple days ago?”

“No,” I replied, and kept my expression neutral.

“Some kind of gas main explosion or something. Killed a bunch of folk. Such a shame.” He shook his head.

My heart was still for several moments. I turned to the window and bit my lip. “That’s terrible,” I said in a low voice.

“They say these thing come in waves. Disasters, I mean.” He hawked and spat out his window. “Just like that tornado that ripped through Seattle yesterday.”

I turned back around. “A tornado in Seattle?”

“That’s what I said. It was all over the news. Didn’t you hear? Some kind of freak storm or something. Destroyed half a city block. Can you imagine?”

Seattle? I didn’t have Neil’s gift for intuition, but something tickled my thoughts.

“Actually,” I said, “can you drop me off at the bus station in Flagstaff? Maybe there’s something for me out on the coast.”

...to be continued in

Angel’s Breath (Fallen Angels – Book 2)

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## About The Author

Valmore Daniels has lived on the coasts of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic Oceans, and dozens of points in between.

An insatiable thirst for new experiences has led him to work in several fields, including legal research, elderly care, oil & gas administration, web design, government service, human resources, and retail business management.

His enthusiasm for travel is only surpassed by his passion for telling tall tales.

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# **The Gods of Dream – Daniel Arenson**

**The Gods of Dream**

**By**

**[Daniel Arenson](#)**

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**Discover the world** of dreams and nightmares...

What are dreams? Some think they are figments of our mind. But what if they were wisps of a distant, magical world ... a world you could visit? Twins Cade and Tasha discover Dream, the land dreams come from. It is a realm of misty forests, of verdant mountains, of mysterious gods who send dreams into our sleep. Cade and Tasha seek solace there; they are refugees, scarred and haunted with memories of war. In Dream, they can forget their past, escape the world, and find joy. Phobetor, the god of Nightmare, was outcast from Dream. Now he seeks to destroy it. He sends his monsters into Dream, and Cade and Tasha find their sanctuary threatened, dying. To save it, the twins must overcome their past, journey into the heart of Nightmare, and face Phobetor himself. Here's a preview from *The Gods of Dream*:

## **Chapter One**

### **A Song of Sand and Salt**

“Dream is the only place that’s good,” Tasha whispered. “It’s *our* place. Remember that, Cade.”

She clutched him from her hospital bed, wrists bandaged. She was his twin, only twenty-two, but her face looked so spent, so old, her eyes sunken and her skin ashen. The sheets wrapped around her like a shroud. Cade could only nod and hold her hands.

“I remember,” he whispered with a dry throat.

“If you die, Cade—”

“Tash—”



“Just listen! You never listen. If you die, Cade, let your spirit find its way to Dream. Wait for me at Sunflower Corner on top of Dandelion Hill. Remember the mulberry tree we planted there?” Cade remembered that too. He nodded. “We’re not going to die, Tasha.”

Her eyes were moist. Nurses walked outside the room, wheeling carts, but here they were alone. The curtains were closed, shielding them from the other beds, leaving them in a cocoon of sheets, bandages, white walls and green tiles.

“Someday we all die,” Tasha said. “But Dream lives forever. Our place.” She shut her eyes.

Cade sighed, looking down upon her. She was so pale, her black hair wispy, purple sacks under her eyes. How many times had it been now? Three? Four? His sister had been trying to kill herself since that day ... that day of blood and fire, that day that left them alone in the world, scarred. The shrapnel had broken his body; it had broken Tasha’s soul.

“Meet me in Dream tonight,” she said, eyes red, crusty, as if she would cry but had no tears left. “Tonight we meet at Seashell Shore. Okay, Talon?”

*Talon.* He nodded, hands in his pockets. “Okay, Sunflower.”

Her eyes closed and she slept. Her chest rose and fell as the ceiling fan creaked, as nurses walked by, as the city outside bustled with five million souls flowing through gray streets. Cade turned away.

He marched down the hallways, scarred hands hidden in his pockets, head bent down, staring at the hospital floor. Green tiles stared up at him. He hated those green tiles. He hated his twin sister sometimes. He had to pause, drink from a water cooler, breathe, calm himself. *Keep breathing.*

He remembered the country they had fled. He remembered the day that had torn open his hands, taken their parents, taken Tasha’s joy and made her this shell of pain and memories.

“She wasn’t even there that day,” he whispered, jaw tight.

His fists clenched in his pockets. *She wasn’t even there when the bombs roared, when the fire burned, when the blood and guts and limbs flew across the street.* No. She had been at home that day, painting her landscapes, while he was burned and cut and—

Cade pushed the thought down, took deep breaths, and bit his lip so hard that it hurt. No, she hadn’t been there, but the shrapnel that filled him, that had ripped apart their parents, dug through Tasha nonetheless. When she cut her wrists, time and again, it wasn’t her razor blades that drew her blood. It was that old, jagged shrapnel.

Cade pulled his hands from his pockets, looked at their scars, and shoved them back in. He kept walking. Soon he was outside. He headed home. *Meet me*

*in Dream tonight, she had said. The only place that's good.* She would sleep at the hospital, where she spent so much of her time ... after slicing her wrists ... for visiting those doctors who loved big terms like “post traumatic stress disorder” or “clinical depression” ... sometimes just to visit her friends. *Dream. Where no pain or memories of distant wars can dwell.*

Cade got on the subway, a rusty old train coated with graffiti, the floor a field of fluttering flyers and newspapers. The commuters crowded around him, jostling against him as the train swayed. Tracks screamed and the driver announced the stops in a voice so muffled, it was impossible to understand.

At his subway stop, beggars reached for coins and youths huddled smoking in corners. Cade avoided the main street and walked home through the cemetery. He moved past tombstones coated with ivy and flowers, and under maples and elms shedding their leaves for autumn. Squirrels drank from stone fountains and mausoleums of marble columns frowned. He always took this route, searching for the hawk Windwhisper, remembering. This was the place where they had first discovered Dream.

“Our place,” Tasha said to him every time, clutching him desperately, clinging as if he could save her from the abyss that forever gaped beneath her. “Where everything is good.”

He met Tasha there that night, as they had planned. He lay in bed, alone, his apartment silent and hot around him. The only sound was his pet hamster scurrying in his cage, racing through paper towel rolls. It took Cade an hour to drift off to sleep, but finally he was *there* again, their place. Seashell Shore. She awaited him.

And they were no longer Cade and Tasha, the refugees, the orphan twins. In Dream they were Talon and Sunflower, and she was happy, and he was unscarred and whole, no shrapnel inside him. Talon and Sunflower, prince and princess of the wilderness.

“*Yalene*, Talon!” Sunflower called to him in the language of dreams. She stood atop a mossy boulder that rose from the sea. Waves sprayed her feet and sunlight glowed around her. Feathers adorned her lustrous black hair, and she wore raiment of silk and gold. A silver helm topped her head, topaz bracelets encircled her wrists instead of bandages, and light danced in her eyes. Around her, green waves whispered over seashells and sparkling stones.

“*Yalene*, Sunflower,” he replied. He walked toward her, the sand caressing his feet. A band held his hair back from his forehead, and he wore a necklace with a stone talisman shaped as a talon, the stone that gave him his Dreamname. He carried a lyre over his back, and paintbrushes hung from his belt; here in Dream, they could make music and art as they pleased, for they lived in muse.

“I’m glad I chose Seashell Shore for tonight,” she said, the sun in her smile. Whales leapt in the distance behind her, and birds of paradise soared overhead. “I was considering Tropical Canopy, or maybe Fruit Forest, but you know what? I think Seashell Shore is my favorite among the places we’ve discovered so far in Dream.”

Cade helped her off the boulder, and they walked through the shallow water. Smooth stones glowed beneath their feet like jewels alight. “I like Seashell Shore too,” Cade said. “Someday I’d like to visit the birch forest in the west, where the faeries live. We’ll walk for as long as we can, and see what new places we find.”

“I’d like that too, Talon. But not this night. Tonight let’s swim!”

She splashed him, soaking him with sea water, and ran toward the depths. Soon she was swimming as dolphins somersaulted around her. Cade swam beside her through the sparkling waters.

“Race me to Coconut Island!” she said. They swam, laughing, until they reached an islet, seven coconut trees growing upon it. They lay on the sand, spent, and found a basket waiting beneath one tree. Inside were sandwiches and fruit, and they ate in the shade of the palms. Ahead across the water, above Seashell Shore, the mountains of Dream soared, verdant.

*Dream. Our place.*

“It’s almost time to wake up,” Cade said in a small voice, feet in the cool water, hands jingling seashells.

“No,” she said and clutched his shoulder, voice desperate, eyes haunted, fingers digging. “Don’t talk of the real world here. Here there are no Cade and Tasha. Here there are only Talon and Sunflower, prince and princess of the wilderness. Nobody can hurt us here, Cade. Nobody.”

Cade cracked open a coconut against a rock. “Okay. For a few moments more.”

She looked at him. “I’m so glad Windwhisper showed us this place, Talon. I wish I never had to leave.”

But then he was awake, lying in his bed.

He sat up. From outside came the sounds of trucks and sirens, and gray morning light slanted onto him, dim under the clouds. A garbage truck backed up outside his window, beeping like some great melancholy bird, filling Cade’s room with the smells of smog and rotten fruit. Cade tossed off his blankets and stood up.

The boiler was out again; he showered in cold, hard water. *At least there are no arguments over the shower this morning*, he thought. Not with Tasha away. Numb, he pulled on a golf shirt, brushed his hair, brushed his teeth. He ate a

bagel on the subway, got to work late, and snuck in without the boss seeing. He spent nine hours typing, hunched over, typing and typing and telling himself, “Fourteen dollars an hour, just keep typing.” Scarred hands over the keyboard. Happy hour tonight, Cade? Not tonight. Family thing. My sister, she’s sick.

Subway again, on his way home, the commuters jostling against him, newspapers and coffee cups tumbling around his feet, the train like a boat on waves. *Like the waves at Seashell Shore.*

Tasha was already home when he got there, wrists still bandaged. She sat alone by the window, her back to him, a silhouette against the city lights. She turned to face Cade, and for a moment her face was blank, her eyes lifeless. Then she forced a smile. “Hi, twin brother.”

“Hello, Tash. It’s good to see you back.”

And that was it.

That was all they needed. *Prince and princess of the wilderness.*

They ate mac and cheese in silence, and Cade drank four beers on the balcony, looking out over the gray city below, the millions of people scurrying down smoggy streets. *Gray, the color of forgetting.* He tried to forget. He spent every evening trying to forget. A siren wailed in the distance and dogs barked.

Tasha sat in the living room, knitting, a blanket pulled over her knees. Their mother had loved to knit. Cade could still see her in his mind—knitting in the rocking chair by the fireplace, humming old tunes, graying hair pulled into a bun. He barely remembered their parents anymore, the old country, anything before that day of fire, that day that broke their family. But he remembered the knitting. He remembered that.

“I’ll be at Sunflower Corner tonight,” Tasha said to him, passing by the balcony on her way to bed. “Meet me there.”

Cade sipped another beer.

That night he went into bed and found himself standing among sunflowers six feet tall. The flowers were like dinner plates full of seeds, bright yellow, their leaves green and wide. The sky stretched endless and blue above, ants ran along the brown crumbly earth, and swallowtails flew past him, leaving wakes of sparkling powder. The air smelled fresh like flowers and soil and health, and the sunlight glistened.

“Where are you, Sunflower?” he called, the talon stone glinting against his chest.

He heard her laugh ahead. “Find me!”

He ran between the sunflowers, sandals kicking up earth. He glimpsed purple and golden scarves, and heard his twin laugh, and he chased. They ran, playing, as they would as kids before the wars, for in Dream they could be as children

reborn. Soon he reached Dandelion Hill, which rose like a huge bowl from the sunflowers, covered with swaying dandelions. He heard Tasha laugh, and he saw her running up the hill. He followed and caught her by the mulberry tree they had planted, her favorite place in Dream.

“Yalene, Talon, god of Dream!” She spread her arms to her sides, her scarves blowing, and leaned her head back. The breeze streamed through her hair, and her face was serene, smiling, her eyes shut.

“Yalene, Sunflower.”

They ate from baskets of fruit and breads, and walked among the flowers, and hiked until they reached Grass Sea, where rolling plains of grass swayed. In the distance grew misty forests, and beyond the trees soared cobalt mountains capped with snow.

Tasha inhaled deeply. “Dream. I love how it smells here.”

“It’s time to wake up soon.”

She punched his shoulder. “Stop it, Talon! Or I’ll kick your butt.” Suddenly she gasped. “Look!” She pointed to the sky.

Cade looked, shielding his eyes against the sun. The hawk glided beneath the fluffy white clouds, his shadow racing upon the grass. Windwhisper. Their guardian of Dream, the holder of its secrets and wonders.

“Do you remember when we first met Windwhisper in the cemetery?” Tasha asked.

“Of course.” He watched the hawk as it soared.

“He chose us, Talon. Remember that always. He chose us to be princes of Dream. He gave it to us, to be our place.”

Soon the hawk disappeared into the distance, and Cade woke up in bed. It was morning.

And so they forgot.

And so they escaped.

They ran through the forests of Dream, fleeing that day, that terror and blood, the shrapnel that still coursed through Cade. They swam through the sea, and climbed the flowery mountains, and ran across the meadows, never thinking of the world, their parents whom they had left buried behind in a far country. Dream was beautiful. *The only place that’s good. The only place that matters.* Talon and Sunflower, chosen by Windwhisper. And so they lived from dream to dream.

Until the beast arrived.

\* \* \* \* \*

At first they only sensed the creature. It invaded as a whisper, a chill on the wind and a tingle up the spine. They were exploring Tropical Canopy, parrots and ferns around them, waterfalls trickling, when they suddenly shivered. The wind howled, but then the parrots chirped again, and sunlight fell between the trees and vines.

“What was that?” Cade whispered. “It felt ... wrong.”

Tasha was pale. She bit her lip and shook her head vigorously. “Nothing. There is nothing wrong in Dream. There never will be.”

Cade looked around, but saw only sunlight, waterfalls, flowers and birds. *Nothing. Just a cold wind.*

But the next day, they saw tracks in the sand of Seashell Shore—smoking tracks, black and sticky, clawed and raising a foul stench. Cade knelt to examine them, but Tasha kicked sand over them, and kept kicking until they were gone. “This does not belong in Dream,” was all she said, fists clenched.

“What made those tracks?” Cade whispered. He could still smell them, a smell like old fire and blood, a smell like that day worse than any other. *It’s as if that memory walks here, a living thing*, Cade thought but said nothing.

Tasha squared her shoulders. “I don’t care. This is Dream. I won’t allow anything bad here.”

They kept playing, running, swimming, racing, laughing as children. The thing lived there with them, and they ignored it, refused to fear it; this was their world, endlessly beautiful and full of magic.

And yet the thing lingered.

Over time, they came to call this presence the Crunge, their beast of haunting, though how or when they first imagined its name, Cade did not know. Sometimes they only saw its tracks or droppings. Sometimes they spotted bits of its foul, oily fur upon trees or stones. Once Cade thought he glimpsed the beast, great and shaggy, walking between the trees, but when he looked again it was gone.

“I don’t care about this Crunge,” Tasha said, though Cade noticed that her knuckles were white around the spear she carried. “Talon and Sunflower are lords of Dream, prince and princess of the wilderness, and they can defeat any invader.”

Cade wore a quiver of feathered arrows over his back, and held a bow in his hand. Yet still, for all their weapons and worries, they swam in the seas, and ran through the forests and meadows, and ate among the flowers. Every night they visited their place, sometimes Beluga Beach, sometimes Butterfly Valley or Caterpillar Meadow, and whenever they saw smoking tracks, they turned the other way. They made music and they painted murals across the sides of cliffs

and great boulders.

“I won’t flee that place!” Tasha said one morning, sitting in their kitchen, eating cereal before Cade had to leave for work. “It’s our special place, Cade. Remember that. I’m so happy there. It’s the only place I’m happy. Windwhisper gave it to us.”

Cade sighed and lowered his head. “I know.”

That night they met in Fruit Forest, where fruits of every kind grew. They ate pears, apples, apricots, kiwis, grapes, until they could eat no more. They lay upon a sunny knoll, watching the monarchs that flew above. Cade patted his belly, and Tasha wove flowers into a tiara for her hair. “When I die, my spirit is going to find this place,” she said, as she always said. “I’ll travel to Dream and be happy here forever.”

*Happy here forever.* Cade looked at the fluffy clouds, and his hands played with the grass. He opened his mouth to answer Tasha, and then a shadow fell upon them.

Oily fur loomed, a howl tore the air, and claws came down.

Tasha screamed and lashed her spear, but claws splintered the wood. Cade knocked an arrow, but saw only rotting fangs dripping saliva. And then he was awake in his bed, and he heard Tasha screaming in her bedroom.

He met her in the hallway of their apartment. She was pale and shaking, her hair tousled, her fingernails digging into her palms. Bloody scratches ran down her shoulder.

“Tasha, you’re hurt!”

She leaned her head against the wall, trembling. Cade rushed to her and held her.

“Cade,” she said, eyes huge and haunted, “we can no longer visit Dream.”

Tears filled her eyes. She spent the rest of the night weeping.

Visit the author at [danielarensen.com](http://danielarensen.com)